



THE CULTURE CULT

Designer Tribalism
and Other Essays

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Introduction

Romantic primitivism has two faces, and its romantic face is by far the prettier. This is the one that gave the world a whole collection of colorful and eccentric Englishmen who liked to dress up as Arabs, jump onto camels, and ride about over the sands of the Middle East. What the camels made of it is anyone's guess—but it was harmless stuff on the whole, and Lawrence of Arabia was only the most famous of his countrymen to enjoy the masquerade.

The primitivist face is more problematic. Not long ago, in 1996, actress and ex-model Lauren Hutton ventured into tourist-anthropology among the Masai in Africa. Taking her two little boys along with her, she visited a witch doctor, tasted his potions, saw a cow slaughtered, and watched red-robed Masai warriors drinking blood from the carcass—the whole episode accompanied by maternal yelps of “wow!”

But there weren't many wows from her boys. In fact they barely cracked a smile, and one of them burst into tears. Watching their reactions it was impossible not to think of the Hans Andersen tale about the emperor who had no clothes. Both of the Hutton children clearly wanted to tell their gushy mum that no matter how hard they looked at those warriors, and no matter how much she enthused about the wonders of Africa, Masai culture “had no clothes”—in other words, it didn't match the romantic idealization she seemed to have fixed in her mind. Despite lots of prompting, they were still not convinced that the life of the Masai was better than the life they knew, or that hot blood straight from the beast tasted better than Coke.

But that was the lesson Ms. Hutton wanted her children to learn. That was the enlightenment their African visit was meant to achieve. The missionary purpose of this Turner Productions show was to con-

vert its audience to the view that Masai culture is just as good as Western civilization, if not better. On top of this, the Culture Cult goes still further. It claims that primitive cultures have a uniqueness which should be seen as sacred, and that to assimilate them to modern ways would be a crime. Indeed, today, for many people of religious temperament, the salvation of primitive cultures has replaced the salvation of souls. There are a number of problems with this new philosophy however.

- The Culture Cult holds that primitive culture is not inferior to modern civilization—just different. All cultures therefore exist on a level plain. But there's a Big Ditch right in the middle of this plain which separates the tribal world from modernity, and attempts to deny its existence can only end in tears. There are political differences between tribalism and Civil Society; there are economic differences between communalism and the way we live now; and there are cognitive differences in the way we think about cause and effect. To pretend that these differences can be "reconciled" merely with enough goodwill is futile. They are not reconcilable, and they are not going to go away.
- The Culture Cult calls for a radical simplification of modern life. It yearns for romantic simplicity, and while going back to the Pleistocene might perhaps be thought extreme, communalism is seen as a practical goal. But there have been thousands of communes, and one way or another they all reinvented the wheel. The complexities they too rashly rejected proved indispensable after all. At the deepest level life itself is about ever-extending complexity, and it is time to stop dreaming about going back to the land or revisiting the social arrangements of the past. They aren't options, and they probably never were.
- Culture cultists take a sour view of modernity—when they can bring themselves to think about it at all. They forget that modern civilization (aka Civil Society) allows changes of government without bloodshed, civil rights, economic benefits, religious toleration, and political and artistic freedom. The alternatives to Civil Society do not. Most traditional cultures feature domestic repression, economic backwardness, endemic

disease, religious fanaticism, and severe artistic constraints. If you want to live a full life and die in your bed, then civilization—not romantic ethnicity—deserves your thoughtful vote.

Romantic primitivism—the idealizing of social simplicity and the world of the "noble savage"—has been around for a long time. You can find it in classical Greece 2,500 years ago: the Cynics and the Stoics are examples. And no doubt you could find it earlier, too. Chanakya are, even in Nineveh, soon after the invention of the wheel, loud calls were heard for reinstating the holy pedestrianism of the past. In the words of two scholars who looked closely at the subject from its first appearance in classical times, primitivism represents "the unending revolt of the civilized against civilization."¹

This revolt has one invariable feature. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau himself dramatically demonstrated, those most excited by the idea of "noble savagery" have had no experience at all of true dirt-and-diseases tribal life. What inspires them is an *idée fixe* in the mind. This was pretty clear when Lauren Hutton fronted up to the Masai. Though not all Culture Cultists are as loud in their eager cries of Gosh and Wow, the noisiest and most excitable are always media folk, imaginative writers or campus intellectuals who haven't a clue what they're getting into. Romantic primitivism consists of fantasies in the heads of urban dwellers—delusions of a morally superior, Edenic world beyond the horizon—which are then projected onto primitive peoples themselves.²

Against the prevailing trend this book regards everything associated with the Culture Cult as bad news. Part I (and chapter one, in particular) argues that romanticizing the primitive leads to major misunderstandings about tribal minorities—misunderstandings which damage their prospects in the modern world. Chapter two looks at the history of communes. Chapters three and four are about Rousseau on the one hand, and bohemia on the other, and describe the corrupting effect both have had on anthropology.

Part II discusses the contributions of three influential thinkers of our time—Karl Polanyi, Isaiah Berlin, and Karl Popper. Polanyi's obsessive search for an ideal precapitalist culture led him to idealize the bloodstained West African kingdom of Dahomey. Sir Isaiah Berlin, Latvian immigrant to Britain who had a prestigious academic career, did much to promote the ideals of continental romanticism. Karl

Popper, on the other hand, was very different; his attitude toward the romanticism of the Culture Cult was the opposite of Berlin's. What both he and Ernest Gellner see as a "Big Ditch" separated the "closed societies" of tribalism from the "open societies" of the modern world, and defending the Open Society was the main duty of thinking men and women.

Part III expands the discussion to treat wider issues. Chapter eight considers the factors making for cultural success or failure—matters important at a time when huge cash payments are being made to countries which, in many cases, are institutionally incapable of being helped. Chapter nine examines the history of the terms "culture" and "civilization," and their varied use by Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and Raymond Williams.

The romantic primitivism of the Culture Cult did not originate among tribal people themselves. Nor is it found among the poor. It is a Western sentimentalism fashionable among spoiled, white, discontented urbanites. But tribal people can easily get caught up in the fantasizing of their media admirers and academic friends, and some of the unhappy results of this are the subject of chapter one, "The New Stone Age."

PART I

ROMANTIC PRIMITIVISM

The Anthropological Connection

The New Stone Age

Should American Indians and New Zealand Maoris and Australian Aborigines be urged to preserve their traditional cultures at cost? Should they be told that assimilation is wrong? And is it wise to leave them entirely to their own devices? Cases vary, but the Australian example suggests that the answers are no, no, and no. The chance of a good life for indigenes is the same as for you and me: fluency and literacy in English, as much math as we can handle, an job. In the year 2000 artificially petrified indigenes are doomed.

Since the folly of locking up native peoples in their old-time cultures is obvious, but it is tasteless to say so, governments have everywhere resorted to the rhetoric of "reconciliation." This pretends that the problem is psychological and moral: re-jig the public mind, leading political figures to adopt a contrite demeanor and apologize for the sins of history, and all will be well. Underlying this is the assumption that we are all on the same level plain of social development, divided only by misunderstanding.

This is false. The division is deep—there is a Big Ditch between the tribal world and modernity. Until around 1970 governments in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand accepted the fact, and they saw their duty as helping indigenes to cross the ditch. For that reason they concentrated on better health, education, and housing, and let the chips of traditional culture fall where they may. That was how Western civilization had dealt with its own traditions—creatively destroying those that would not change. Creative destruction is the law of historical advance.

But romantic primitivism swept all such progressive policies away. Planning for the future and looking forward was out. Looking backward became the only proper way to look. Transfixed by the Culture Cult, a hyperidealized vision of traditional life was adopted, and the effect on indigenes of romanticizing their past has been devastating.

On the one hand Australian Aborigines found themselves being used as pawns in political games played for high stakes. On the other hand they became the deluded victims of the extravagances of their admirers. If your traditional way of life has no alphabet, no writing, no books, and no libraries, and yet you are continually told that you have a culture which is "rich," "complex," and "sophisticated," how can you realistically see your place in the scheme of things? Why not hang up a "Gone Fishing" sign and head for the beach? I might do that myself. In Australia, policies inspired by the Culture Cult have brought the illiterization of thousands of Aborigines whose grandparents could read and write.

The New Age Meets the Aborigines

On the desk before me there's an advertisement for an Easter Psychic New Age Festival dedicated to Alternative Schools, Yoga, and Meditation Groups. One hour from Melbourne in an attractive pastoral setting with "heritage accommodation" and vegetarian meals there will be daily fortune readings, workshops, demonstrations, tastings, healing, health products, crystals, spirit drawing, Reiki, natural skin-care, and not only numerous stallholders selling the work of artisans but "pundits with the latest New Age skills."

We are also invited to "Experience the Spirit of India" and be escorted on spiritual journeys, to come and see an exhibit of the "Crystals of the World," and to consult Wendy L. Smith, an astrologer with a mobile phone. Does Wendy offer the latest New Age skills? Or does she offer some of the oldest Stone Age beliefs with a digital upgrade? Neither astrology nor spiritual journeys is exactly new.

But that's how things are today. And lots of Native Americans and Australian Aborigines inhabit this modish environment, too. Seamlessly blending into the Stone Age have come New Age beliefs—beliefs which have influenced both American Indian and Aboriginal self-understanding. The result is a synthetic New Stone Age involving bits

and pieces from many times and places. And the strange response to all this is one of the more surprising things about *Mutant Messiah Down Under*, a book by a Kansas City naturopath, Marlo Morgan.

Plainly a work of imaginative fiction, Morgan's narrative tells about her experiences with a group of Aborigines known as the Real People, a tribe created by the loving power of Divine Oneness; how she accompanies the Real People on a "walkabout" across Australia; how the Aborigines refer to all whites as Mutants because they have betrayed the ancient simplicities of True Humanity and introduced poverty, slavery, and disease; how the Real People communicate by telepathy and do not know how to lie; how they practice healing using lizard and plant oils and by admonishing unruly organs to behave; how after 50,000 years they have destroyed no forests, polluted no water, and endangered no species; how the world is divided into Peaceful Browns and Aggressive Mutant Whites and how the Real People, having had more than enough of the latter, are planning to leave Planet Earth and seek a better world elsewhere.

Standing inside a crystal room as exotic as anything in Coleridge's vision of Xanadu—crystals are very important—and wearing a polished opal on her brow, Morgan learns the ancient Aboriginal art of evanescence, or disappearing into thin air . . . That should be enough to give the flavor of a book in which the lavish use of "incredible" and "amazing" is entirely appropriate.

The anthropologist L. R. Hiatt wrote that nothing remotely like Marlo Morgan's account of Aboriginal life "is to be found anywhere in the reputable literature published since the establishment of the British colony in 1788. If the Real People really exist, they are recent arrivals from outer space pretending to be Aborigines and, for whatever purpose, using Marlo Morgan as their agent. If she really traversed the Australian continent on foot without shoes at an average of twenty miles a day in mid-summer, she may even be one of them."¹ American readers in particular seem to have been delighted to find "the central values and aspirations of the New Age movement enshrined in the world's oldest surviving culture."²

But as Hiatt suggests, the Australian response to the book was revealing. Not long after its release an Aboriginal cultural organization tried to get it withdrawn from sale, and the national representative body for Aborigines sent representatives to America to stop any attempt to make a film. Since it consists of the sort of hokum Holly-

wood would love to get its hands on, that is hardly surprising. But Morgan's absurdities were the last thing Aborigines were worried about. It was not that what she wrote was false (many of them agreed that this was so). What was offensive was that the author had told her story as if she were a fully initiated and paid-up member of the tribe, and was disclosing its secrets to the world at large. About the anthropological untruths in the book they were silent—indeed, they may have rather liked the idea that their ancestors were vegetarian mystics.

You could search a long time before finding anything to equal *Mutant Message*. Literature it is not. But perhaps we should be grateful to Morgan nonetheless, for her book clarified a number of things. It showed how sadly ignorant of their own traditions many Aborigines are today. It showed their willingness to acquiesce in even the grossest misrepresentations, providing the aim is to ennoble and glamorize the past. And it showed what their priorities are. In her naïve fashion Morgan pointed to the Big Ditch separating the modern and the tribal worlds.

The Aborigines' objection underlined the point that traditional societies are meant to be *closed* not *open*, *solidary* not *pluralistic*, *aristocratic* not *egalitarian*. For such people the disclosure of secrets is a much worse sin than telling lies. One Aborigine said that for the crime of disclosure, and whether or not what she wrote was true or false or the Real People even existed, Marlo Morgan of Kansas City should be put to death.

Sacralization in California

About eighty years ago an American Indian named Maria Solares told a story to anthropologist John Harrington. She said that Point Conception was once the departure point for the souls of Chumash Indians. Solares herself was a Christian who died in 1923, and the last Indians who might have taken her story about Indian souls seriously had all died long before that. Other Indians denied her version—and there were lots of versions.

But in 1978 her tale took on new significance. Ranchers in the area felt threatened by a plan to build a liquid natural gas plant nearby. They got a public relations firm from Los Angeles to help fight the proposal, and local Indians and environmental groups in the Santa Barbara area joined the cause. Before long the *Santa Barbara News*

Press was able to tell its readers that if the gas plant went ahead, Chumash archaeological sites would be ruined. Protests and demonstrations began and continued. Media reporters said that while the name Point Conception was fine, the old Indian name of the Western Gate made better sound bites on the news, and soon a whole transcontinental complex of exit gates was discovered with souls passing through them en route to the hereafter.

The laws of demand and supply brought into play by the ranchers proved highly creative—and also stimulated the Indians themselves. Most of them knew nothing of their old-time culture, but with the "discovery" of the importance of Point Conception they began to feel they should, and without even knowing what they'd lost they wanted it back. To help them get it came scores of regional scholars—eco-activists, New Age zealots, and free-range political demonstrators hungry for a fight. Most of them had no ethnic credentials whatever. As the American Indian writer Rayna Green remarked, the seeming fathomless hunger for Indian guruism creates wanna-bes who may be neither genetically nor culturally Indian yet are the most marketable bearers of Indian culture. Through such "substitute impersonation," she said, "Indians . . . are loved to death."³

Authors Brian D. Haley and Larry Wilcoxon note the influence of New Age beliefs at Point Conception, and while the results are less fantastical than in Marlo Morgan's epic the motive is much the same. Both American Indians and counterculturalists have used "populist primitivist imagery and fragments of ethnography to create traditions that are very different in form and content from past beliefs and practices . . . either to appropriate beliefs and practices for a New Age . . . or to become Indian Traditionalists themselves." Despite the fact that "the New Age has negative connotations for many Native Americans, [Chumash] Indian Traditionalists and the eclectic New Agers share a conviction of the centrality of nature which is expressed in primitivist and countercultural, and there is much syncretic 'mixing and matching' between them."⁴

Beginning around 1978, and for the next two decades, anthropologists helped to spread the Point-Conception-as-Western-Gate story either by silencing their doubts or by repeating the story in their writings. Once it was a public issue, those with reservations about the embroidery and sheer invention they had observed fell silent. Eventually the natural gas installation was canceled.

Why Worry? The Academic View

But why worry about romantic cultural inventions, or muddling New Age fantasies with ethnographic facts? We are expected to all know by now that life is a narrative; words mean only what you want them to mean; embellishment has been with us since the first fisherman told tall tales about his catch; and one man's misinterpretation is another man's liberating myth. Postmodernism calls this wisdom—and who are we to object?

For more than twenty years anthropologists have written about constructing reality as if the world and everything in it were mere artifact, about building identity as if any old self-glamorizing fiction will do, about creating the past as an enterprise more exciting than history, about inventing tradition as if traditions were as changeable as store windows—and about as important, too.

The late Roger Keesing tells us that although fictionalized pasts may be false “their symbolic power and political force are undeniable.” And it doesn't matter whether the pasts being recreated are mythical or real as long as they symbolize *resistance* and *revolution*. “Perhaps it matters only whether such political ideologies are used for just causes, whether they are instruments of liberation or of oppression.” Here Keesing is saying that the end justifies the means: however false, newly concocted tribal myths are justified so long as the cause is just. Myths of struggle are especially exciting:

In Australia, idealized representations of the pre-European past are used to proclaim Aboriginal identity and the attachment of indigenous peoples to the land, and are being deployed in environmentalist as well as Aboriginal political struggles. In New Zealand, increasingly powerful and successful Maori political movements incorporate idealized and mythicized versions of a precolonial Golden Age, the mystical wisdom of Aotearoa.⁵

Much the same thing is going on in Hawaii and New Caledonia, wrote the author in 1989, where “the desperate struggle for political power and freedom from colonial oppression” continues night and day.⁶ For Keesing, something called liberation was always just over the hill or around the corner, while the unmasking or demystifying of colonial discourse preoccupied his lively mind to the end. Nevertheless, some of what he said was useful because he candidly recognized

the romanticism involved. “Maori and Aboriginal Australian ideologues are engaged in reconstructing ancestral pasts characterized by Mystical Wisdom, Oneness with the Land, Ecological Reverence, an Social Harmony,” he noted, going on to describe the way “warfare and violence (including Maori cannibalism) are carefully edited out of these reinvented pasts.” Warfare and cannibalism were found everywhere in New Zealand, but they clash uncomfortably with the “idealization of the primitive” required among the Maori today.⁷

What Keesing was talking about is a key aspect of romantic primitivism—the moral transfiguration of the tribal world. This projects benignly Disneyfied way of life, all flowers and contentment, a stress-free smiles and communal harmony. Not surprisingly the tale of Mystical Wisdom and Ecological Reverence described above are eagerly adopted by modern indigenes seeking a more tasteful view of their own past. Keesing was aware of this, and he complained that romantic primitivism recklessly deleted “not simply violence, but domination (of women, the young, commoners) and exploitation. The costs in physical pain and premature death of infectious disease only crudely addressed by magical means are all too easily edited out as well—particularly nowadays, when the Primitive is assigned mystical wisdom in matters of holistic health and healing as well as ecology.”⁸

It's good to be reminded of the traditional cost in terms of cruelty, pain, and disease. But Keesing might also have paused to notice the huge financial costs his “liberating fictions” have imposed on modern citizens in modern states. When, as a result of imaginative lying, contenting parties are hauled into courts of law, and the inevitable collision with reality occurs, millions of dollars are routinely squandered as judicial processes try to disentangle fact from fantasy—if not downright mendacity—while indigenes often find themselves swept up and exploited by powerful political forces beyond their control.

The Hindmarsh Island Affair

They weren't ranchers, and they didn't have dramatic views of the Pacific coast. But the residents of Hindmarsh Island were fond of their sleepy lagoon. They liked their distance from Adelaide, their isolation, their peace, and their water views. And the absence of a bridge joining this secluded refuge to the mainland was an added attraction.

Others however wanted development—two of them with land on the island in particular—and they very much wanted a bridge. Neither environmental law nor Aboriginal interests had been ignored in their proposal, and one inquiry after another had cleared the project. Archaeologists reported that although there had indeed been Aboriginal occupation by members of the Ngarrindjeri tribe long ago, there was nothing more—nothing sacred had happened there, nothing religious, nothing worth a fuss. So in April 1990 the state government authorized the bridge builders to proceed.

Now the challenge was clear. One of the bridge opponents owned “an impressive weekender on the island . . . a modern house that sits high on the bank atop lush lawns that sweep down to a private mooring. From the lawns the view to the south-west takes in a watery foreground and the ferry crossing.”⁹ The owner of this estate had connections and approached some politicians he knew. As news spread of a growing opposition movement other protestors arrived—among them a union organizer with an iron bar. Said the man with the sweeping lawns to the man with the iron bar, “Let’s see if we can get some Aboriginals to help the cause.”¹⁰

No sooner said than done. When asked if there were any sacred places an Aboriginal spokesman said, “not that I know of, but I’m sure if we look around we can find something.”¹¹ This got a laugh. Anthropologists, too, were keen to do their bit. One of them deplored the absence of Aboriginal women’s rites (“What a pity about the women’s business—it would be nice if there was some women’s business”), and soon after these encouraging words had been spread around events moved quickly. Within two weeks a tale was circulating about river mouths, estuarine waters, birth passages, and female fertility in general.

A local Aboriginal activist, Doreen Kartinyeri, now called her people together and laid down the law. To an audience composed of the surprised but credulous on the one hand, and the surprised but doubtful on the other, she claimed inside knowledge not heard of by anyone before. Next a letter was drafted to the federal government which said: “The Ngarrindjeri women are quite adamant about the building of the bridge at Goolwa. They do not want the bridge to be built as the site is incredibly sacred to the women, their culture and spiritual well-being.” Further thought and consultation improved this statement to read as follows:

This area represents a crucial part of Ngarrindjeri cultural beliefs about the creation and constant renewal of life along the Lower Murray Lakes. . . . The most serious cultural heritage dilemma concerns the Goolwa channel and its vital cultural heritage significance as part of the Meeting of the Waters. The cultural traditions concerning this “site” and its relationship to the surrounding lakes are highly confidential and only their very general nature is documented in this report.¹²

Bridge construction was then banned by the federal government for twenty-five years.

But now the advantage of having a federal system in Australia came apparent. The national government in Canberra which banned the bridge was Labor. The state government of South Australia was not. Smelling a malodorous infestation of rats the State of South Australia now launched a Royal Commission to enquire into the whole matter, and at the end of it commissioner Iris Stevens reported that in her view “the whole of the ‘women’s business’ was fabricated in order to convince (federal) Minister Robert Tickner to ban the bridge,” that the women’s rituals described by Doreen Kartinyeri were previously unknown, that the claim that Hindmarsh Island had crucial spiritual significance for the Aborigines was made up, and that some very nasty things had been going on. Right from the start of the commission’s work there had been threats of violence—and even death threats—made against witnesses.¹³

Anthropologists had persuaded themselves that tradition was infinitely flexible, and that Kartinyeri’s imaginative fabulizing was a worthy effort. The court was not convinced. For the late Roger Keesing and others, Kartinyeri’s creative inventiveness should have been an act of liberation born of her struggle against “the hegemonic discourse of colonial oppression.” But instead of liberating her people it dragged many innocent Aborigines through the mud.

Irreconcilable Values: Solidarity Versus Truth

Few of us would regard the death penalty for Marlo Morgan as warranted. Even if she did disclose something in *Mutant Message* in 1994, how could it deserve taking of life? But that’s what you have

to expect in "closed societies" of the kind Karl Popper described in his 1945 book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. In closed societies knowledge tends to be surrounded by high walls and prohibitions, which confine it to elders, or priests, or chiefs, or kings, and these taboos are strictly enforced. Nor is that all. Knowledge itself in such a world is irreconcilable with both what we know and how we think today. And once more a Big Ditch divides the two.

Philosophers sometimes describe knowledge in modern society as *rationaly justified true belief*. But in the definition of knowledge used by anthropologists rational justification is irrelevant. Belief of any kind is *culturally justified*, and that suffices. All that is needed is for enough people to believe that X is true, and X is true—even if X asserts that a cow jumped over the moon. What is called tribal "knowledge" usually reflects the needs of group solidarity more than anything else: as such it often represents *culturally justified false belief*.

Trying to get a grip on these matters Ernest Gellner wrote that the illogical role of solidarity in traditional cultures is far from accidental. It is natural enough, and makes sense in its way. One reason a supreme value is placed on solidarity derives from the advantages it offers in warrior societies ruled by force rather than by law, truth, and facts. This led Gellner to propose a universal principle: *Logical coherence and social solidarity are inversely related*. So the more solidarity you have, the less logic you get, and vice versa.¹⁴

Solidarity is a typical virtue from the world of the past which preceded Civil Society—medieval, Masai, Maori, whatever—where great military risks prevailed. It reflects the defensive psychology of human groups under threat. "All for one and one for all" is the ethic of the ambushed platoon, the encircled army, the besieged nation—of America in 1776, of Britain in 1940, of Russia in 1941. Solidarity of this kind may or may not have logical elements—it often has. But because victory is all-important, solidarity also favors the irrational ways human groups can be made to stick together, whatever lies must be told.

Logical coherence and consistency on the other hand is typical of modern society. It means valuing the way statements and facts rationally hang together, because logical coherence is what leads to truth. For modern societies based on science and on modern law this is essential. The consequence of logical coherence and social solidarity being "inversely related" is that in tribal life facts and truth often get

shoved aside—something a specialist in Aboriginal culture has confirmed. Discussing a controversy over a sacred site in northern Australia Dr. Ian Keen tells us that inconsistency and contradiction is exactly what we should expect:

I think that there is more tolerance in Aboriginal interaction of what white Australians regard as inconsistencies or contradictory statements. Concepts akin to "belief" in the languages of Aboriginal people . . . most closely imply *loyalty to a group* as much as holding a proposition in one's heart as true . . . or commitment to "objective" truth.¹⁵

Indeed they do. And that's what Gellner was driving at. Solidarity or what Keen calls "loyalty to a group," outweighs truth. As for the obligatory lying that results from rating loyalty higher than truth—and presents irreconcilable conflicts at law, Keen appears to find no problem for our courts in this. To him there's no Big Ditch at all.

Rousseau in Arnhem Land

The scene is idyllic. A man is wading out into a tropical lagoon, sucking the stem of a water lily as he goes. One or two youngsters are with him and some women too. The sky is reflected in the still surface of the pool, and lilies with big green leaves float on the water. They may be looking for water snakes. No one speaks.

These Aborigines are timeless romantic symbols on a television screen, and if they are mute this is probably deliberate. Human voice might intrude on the pristine image of noble savagery the filmmaker is trying to convey. Anyone who has made documentaries will also notice something else—an unnatural aimlessness about their movements. If they were truly wading in the water, or genuinely gathering eggs or hunting water snakes, their actions would be much more definite. Instead they move with dreamy languor—the "dreamtime" languor of a spiritual people some might say.

But all this has nothing to do with spirituality. It's merely what happens when a film director asks a man to walk into a lagoon without giving him a reason for doing so. On television the whole scene above lasts barely half a minute, though if you added up all the hours it has been used as a picturesque background image by the state—

owned television channel, the elapsed time might come to days or weeks. Repeatedly, when news about life on the horrifying outback settlements has been reported—news which in the form of live footage might be very disturbing in urban living rooms—these water lilies have appeared on the screen.

The place where the lily-pond Aborigines live is in the tropical north. Others live in country towns or the countryside nearby, while large numbers live in the cities to the south. It should be clearly understood that the more urbanized southern people have made good progress over the past thirty years. Aborigines have long been a presence in Australian sport—symbolized by the tennis achievements of Evonne Goolagong—and there are now star players in numerous football teams. The runner Cathy Freeman is only one of the many who have been highly successful in athletics. A dance company with a repertoire combining modern and traditional Aboriginal dance styles has been well received. And in each of these fields they have been warmly welcomed into the modern world by their fellow Australians, and won international recognition for their achievements. In other words, they have been successfully assimilated into modern life.

Not so the people who concern us here. These are the Aborigines on the northern settlements, the ones granted a good deal of independence in the past three decades. And these are the people who have suffered the Culture Cult's most vicious effects—the victims of the antiassimilationist policies embraced and promoted by idealistic middle-class whites in the south.

Under the banner of cultural self-determination, lowered standards saw literacy levels fall to almost zero. The lax administration of public health witnessed spreading malnutrition and disease. When controls on alcohol were abolished this was seen as a step toward taking responsibility for one's own well-being. It did not have that effect. One community after another was wiped out as countless millions of dollars in welfare payments were "pissed against a wall," while petrol sniffing became widespread among juveniles. Numerous mutually reinforcing social pathologies have produced a state of affairs so grim that Australians cannot bring themselves to discuss it publicly except in the most guarded manner; few want to discuss it honestly even in private. Nobody any longer believes in a solution, and much of the nation is on the edge of political hysteria—which partly explains the escapism of television's flir-

tation with Rousseau. But because of the mandatory silence imposed by the Culture Cult, no one dares say a thing.

At a seminar in Sydney in 1999 the effects of bilingual teaching were described. The principal of a Darwin college told how, between 19 and 1975, Aboriginal students from outlying bush communities arrived with sixth-grade literacy levels. By 1990, after primary education had been handed over to local Aboriginal communities themselves, this had fallen to the third-grade level. Today they arrive at his college completely illiterate, he said, identifying "self-determination," bilingual instruction, and the priority given to preserving Aboriginal traditional culture as the reason.¹⁶

Thirty years ago their parents and grandparents could read and write, but today, says Bob Collins, a former federal Labor senator who has conducted a review of education, "I often have kids staying in my home who cannot even write their names, let alone read anything. And these kids had grandparents who were able to read books and newspapers—anything they picked up."¹⁷ The problem is widespread and growing. Formerly it was the goal of educational policy to help indigenes across the Big Ditch between the preliterate and the literate worlds, so reading and writing English were emphasized. Not anymore. The present Australian Aboriginal leadership is living on the educational capital provided by the teaching policies of thirty to forty years ago, and they now have few literate successors. "Unless this situation is reversed," says Mr. Collins, "self-determination for Aboriginal people is a joke, an absolute joke."¹⁸

Primitivism Versus Literacy

What is literacy? Why is it important? And why is it that a romantic infatuation with Aboriginal culture in Australia has made it necessary that questions like this should have to be asked? To begin with, one might look at John Stuart Mill. At the age of three he was being taught Greek by his father—and paternal encouragement and direction was a vital factor throughout his early years. By the age of eight he had read "the whole of Herodotus, and of Xenophon's *Memories of Socrates* . . . and the first six dialogues of Plato, from the *Euthyphro* to the *Theaetetus* inclusive." He had also read Hume and Gibbon and had been excited by "the heroic defence of the Knights of Ma-

against Spain," and had been required to give his father an account of what he had found in Millar's *Historical View of the English Government*, Mosheim's *Ecclesiastical History*, a life of John Knox, and histories of the Quakers.¹⁹

His father, James Mill, made a point of putting into his hands "books which exhibited men of energy and resource in unusual circumstances, struggling against difficulties and overcoming them." He particularly remembered an early account of the first settlement of New South Wales. "Two books which I never wearied of reading were *Anson's Voyage*, so delightful to most young persons, and a Collection (Hawkesworth's I believe) of Voyages round the World, in four volumes, beginning with Drake and ending with Cook and Bougainville."²⁰ Voyages around the world—not just the oceans, but around the whole universe of learning and literature—expand the mind, and this is how one of the best Victorian minds was made.

Another way of seeing the matter is to look at the historic relation between literacy and progress. David Landes has many examples in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*. Comparative literacy featured in the contrast between Protestant progress and Catholic backwardness. "Two special characteristics of the Protestants," he writes, were highly significant (and they bear directly on one of the problems in Aboriginal education today—the illiteracy of mothers). "The first was stress on instruction and literacy, for girls as well as boys. This was a by-product of Bible reading. Good Protestants were expected to read the holy scriptures for themselves. (By way of contrast, Catholics were catechized but did not have to read, and they were explicitly discouraged from reading the Bible.) The result: greater literacy and a larger pool of candidates for advanced schooling; also greater assurance of continuity of literacy from generation to generation. *Literate mothers matter*."²¹

But everywhere things have continued to improve. Only in the cultural enclaves of Australia's north have the advances already made now been abandoned, with the illiterization of those whose grandparents could read and write. Only there, under the fateful banner of "my culture, right or wrong," has an environment developed in which education cannot even take place.

A Darwin high school principal said that "education is impossible in the settlement communities because the fabric of life is so dis-

turbed and so broken that real education can't occur . . ." For that phrase about the fabric of life being disturbed read "culture"—the broken sociopathic ruin of Aboriginal settlement culture as it is today, not the picturesque lily-ponds served up with the evening news. Education is impossible in these communities because there is no interest in education on the part of parents—no fathers pushing, no mothers encouraging—and as Landes emphasized, *literate mothers matter*. Literacy will only result, the college principal concluded, when Aboriginal parents themselves want it for their children.

Ernest Gellner once commented on the damaging effects of aggressive ethnic assertiveness in the modern state. In his view romantic primitivism is born of a reaction against industrial modernity, a reaction which tends to freeze or petrify all that is most backward in traditional life. In contrast, "equality of status and a continuous culture seems a precondition for the functioning of a complex, occupationally mobile, technically advanced society. Hence it does not easily tolerate cultural fissures within itself, especially if they correlate with inequality which thereby becomes frozen, aggravated, visible, and offensive."²²

In northern Australia thirty years of the policy of Aboriginal culture forever, good or bad, healthy or sick, right or wrong, has seen that come about. The Culture Cult has produced frozen, visible, and offensive inequality. Now the Big Ditch is wider than ever. Such is the result of a romantic fixation on tradition—on the idealizing of primitive culture at the expense of every other value and ability needed today. Illiterate, vocationally disabled, unpresentable outside the ethnographic zoos they live in, these tragic people are Australia's contribution to the New Stone Age.

Karl Popper in New Zealand

How nice and peaceful New Zealand is—said Czech president Václav Havel when he visited a few years ago. Meanwhile, back in the Balkans murderous tribes were killing each other again, and bodies were being exhumed from mass graves every day. But there was nothing like this in New Zealand, as far as he could tell, and he wondered what the secret of this country's success might be.

Havel reminded his audience that Karl Popper had written *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in New Zealand during World War II, when the latter took refuge there from the “tribal fury” of Nazism. Popper's book made an important distinction between the open society of modern civilization and the closed societies of the primitive world, and as Havel recalled these matters he cast his mind back to Czechoslovakia's neighbors to the south and east. For the last two thousand years, he said, wave after wave of aggressive tribalism had persistently threatened Western civilization.

Although there is nothing you could call the “political theory” of romantic primitivism, certain themes are fairly obvious. Isaiah Berlin, for example, combined the highest liberal ideals with a decided weakness for tribalistic chauvinism and nationalistic sentiments. Polanyi's sympathy with the ideal of solidarity, come what may, led him to enthuse about the barbarous regime of Dahomey. Politically speaking, by “tribes” we mean large groups of people

found by some kind of notional kinship, usually by a common language, under a generally hierarchic arrangement of power rising to an apex of elders or chiefs. By "states" we mean large groups however composed, enjoying laws and government equal for all within a common territory.

Humanity made a big step forward when it moved on from politics of blood to politics of geography: "as a result of this evolution, the informal practices of kindred groups, based on private law, gave way to formal public law." A world of *societas* (where men were tied by personal bonds) was superseded by the world of *civitas* (where territorial bonds were paramount). This occurred in Babylon in 1750 B.C., in England about A.D. 900, but not in faraway New Zealand until 1840.¹

In the political sphere, too, a Big Ditch separates tribal society from civil society. On one side you have a social order which is "closed"—closed intellectually, socially, and politically, and ruled by kinship and "blood." On the other side you have a generally progressive social order which is "open"—open to new ideas, to new people taken on their merits as individuals, and to forms of political membership based on adherence to codified law. This important distinction was first formulated in a general way by Popper, in New Zealand, fifty years ago.

The Captain Cook Age in New Zealand

New Zealand is a small country about the size of England in the southwest Pacific. It is famous for its scenery, has about three million people, and on the whole it's a prosperous and pleasant place. However, signs indicate that it could fall apart, bitterly divided between the 15 percent who are Maori Polynesians and the 85 percent who are white (known in the Maori language as *pakeha*). If open conflict breaks out this will be largely a result of the divisive, backward-looking, antiassimilationist doctrines spawned by the heirs of Herder. In fact, it is hard to think of any other reason. Given the least encouragement—as Kiri Te Kanawa shows—the Maori enjoy modern life and hugely contribute to it. But under the dispensation of the ruling Culture Cult in New Zealand it's a different story. Culture is king. And since it has the best claim to historic priority Maori culture is the

anointed King of Kings. Under the widespread proposals for Maori education today, neither the glorious voice nor the spectacular career of a Kiri Te Kanawa could ever happen.

The Maori arrived in these remote islands by canoe some eight hundred years ago, about the time the Gothic cathedrals were being built in Europe, and the environmental impact they had on the region was devastating. There may only have been a handful of Maori at first—around a hundred or so—but within a short time nearly 30 percent of New Zealand's bird life became extinct. Originally there had been large geese, along with snipe, ducks, quail, pelicans, falcons, and an enormous eagle (*Harpagornis moorei*) with a wingspan of three meters.

Unfortunately the most unusual birds were also highly edible—the twelve species of moa. Large and flightless, looking like massive ostriches, moa ranged from about the size of commercial turkeys up to the 3.5-meter-high Giant Moa (*Dinornis giganteus*). Heavily boned and muscled, these weighed up to 250 kg. But all of them carried lots of good meat. Moa had never faced any land predators before, and they were very easily killed. Butchering sites all over the country record where Maori ate them—or did until they became extinct more than 600 years ago. The extermination of all twelve New Zealand moa species, in less than a century after the first Polynesians set foot on the island, is believed to be the fastest megafaunal extinction the world has ever seen.²

At the same time huge areas of forest were burnt: "Lowland podocarp forests were particularly affected, with the distinctive dry forest and shrub of the Canterbury Plains and adjacent interior regions being virtually wiped out." The burning of these forests was done in the course of moa-hunting, and since the forests were also the best areas of moa habitat it also hastened their decline.³ By the time of Captain Cook's arrival in 1770, 50 percent of the forests which had been growing in New Zealand when Polynesians first arrived had disappeared.

As for Maori themselves, their neolithic culture was like many others. They lived by hunting, fishing, and gardening; they dwelled in small, windowless, dirt-floored huts; and they were politically organized into several tribes with numerous subdivisions. But far and away the most notable feature of Maori culture was the incessant warfare. Exactly when this began is hard to say (without any written his-

...ory of their own, the Maori past must be pieced together from the evidence of archaeology), but by around A.D. 1500 heavily fortified villages, or "pa," indicate that it was already a well-established part of native life. These tribal strongholds contained earthworks, ditches, palisades, and dykes. The greater part of Maori economic resources were spent on war, on building giant canoes for sending war parties around the islands, and on fort construction.

Few people in the ethnographic record were more aggressive. The "welcome" dance they presented to visitors was a display of ferocious hostility, while their wood carving snarled and grimaced. All gargoyles without any redeeming piètas, it was the art of a violent and demon-haunted world. By the time the first Europeans arrived, in the words of the New Zealand Maori anthropologist Bruce Biggs, "inter-tribal warfare was endemic and male children were dedicated at birth to 'bearing the spear and the club, fighting and raging, killing war-parties and destroying forts.' Warfare was said to be *he taonga tuku iho* (a treasured heirloom)." Prisoners were routinely baked and eaten. Authorities report that when Abel Janszoon Tasman visited in 1642, "cannibalism was already occurring. Certainly, by the late eighteenth century, the bodies of those killed in war were a prized source of food."⁵

To someone with a sense of history there's nothing surprising about any of this—similar things were probably going on in Europe and many other places between five and ten thousand years ago. It was, after all, only two thousand years ago that the Romans were stamping out human sacrifice among the German tribes. What *is* surprising, however, is the complete suppression in New Zealand today of all public reference to the way of life described above.

A long century of moral transfiguration has finally reached its apogee. With the cosmetic improvements of sundry members of the Culture Cult, only the most decorous and edifying version of the Polynesian past is allowed on public view—a genteel world of wise ecologists, mystical sages, gifted artists, heroic navigators, and pacifists who wouldn't hurt a fly.

A Visitor from Austria Arrives

When the Viennese philosopher Karl Popper arrived in New Zealand in March 1937, it was partly as a result of a misunderstanding. He

had been in Copenhagen in 1936 visiting Niels Bohr in the course of a congress for scientific philosophy. While in Copenhagen a man named Warren Weaver introduced himself to Popper as the European representative of the Rockefeller Foundation—a charming gentleman, wrote Popper, who took great interest in him. But the Rockefeller Foundation itself was a mystery. It "meant nothing to me; I had never heard about the foundations and their work. (Apparently I was very naive.) It was only years later that I realized that if I had understood the meaning of this encounter it might have led to my going to America instead of to New Zealand."⁶

Instead of going to America he went off to the other end of the earth. There Popper became a lecturer in the Department of Psychology and Philosophy at Canterbury College, Christchurch, a provincial town in the South Island of New Zealand. In Christchurch the Nazis and the Communists were far away, and the furies about to descend on Europe were inaudible. Those like myself who grew up in Christchurch at the time remember students in blazers poling flat-bottomed boats on a stream called the Avon, passing beds of daffodils as it wound toward the sea.

But all of this was deceptive. Taken as a whole New Zealand was much closer to old-time tribalism than Vienna. It had been fifteen hundred years since Goths and Vandals had rampaged around Austria. But it had been less than a hundred years since a treaty was signed with the Maori chiefs—the Treaty of Waitangi—the beginning of law and order in a land torn by intertribal wars. The Treaty would soften the effect of conquest and subjection, and would be both misunderstood and neglected, and would in no way deal with the conflict between settlers and Maoris over land. Nevertheless it was a vital step in bringing the Maori people from the neolithic into the modern age.

Maori culture had a number of interesting customs. The institutions of *murū* and *tapu*, for example, embodied tribal conceptions of property and law, and they show how wide the ditch was dividing Maori practices from the way we live today. In the words of an observer of the 1830s *murū* consisted of "the regular legalised and established system of plundering as penalty for offences, which in a rough way resembled our law by which a man is obliged to pay 'damages.' Great abuses had, however, crept into this system, so great, indeed, as to render the retention of any sort of moveable property al-

most an impossibility, and to in great measure discourage the inclination to labour for its acquisition."⁷

In Western eyes one of the stranger aspects of *murū* was that it was often inflicted for accidents—events in which malice aforethought was wholly absent. If a child fell into the fire and was badly burned, and the mother's family came to hear of it, "the father was immediately plundered to an extent that almost left him without the means of subsistence: fishing nets, canoes, pigs, provisions—all went."⁸ Once more we see the general rule in tribal society that there is no such thing as an innocent injurious act. Everything is moralized. Accidents don't just happen. But if they do, someone is held responsible and must pay a price.

Counterbalancing *murū* was *tapu* (this being the Maori form of the generic Polynesian "taboo"), which tended to secure property against predation. In fact *murū* was usually the penalty for some violation of *tapu* itself. Although "earth, air, fire, water, goods and chattels, growing crops, men, women, and children—everything absolutely was subject to its influence, the original object of the ordinary *tapu* seems to have been the preservation of property. This personal form of the *tapu* was permanent, and consisted in a certain sacred character which attached to the person of a chief and never left him." The sacred aura of *tapu* forced everyone to keep their distance, never to touch, and perhaps not even to look—sometimes on pain of death.

A chief's fighting men and associates were also "more or less possessed of this mysterious quality. It extended or was communicated to all their movable property, especially to their clothes, weapons, ornaments, and tools, and to everything in fact which they touched."⁹ This had practical value. But *tapu* was combined with a range of prohibitions making innovation in thought or deed difficult, if not impossible. It closed off whole areas of the mind to new ideas.

As he worked away on the manuscript of *The Open Society*, Karl Popper was aware of this feature of Polynesian life. There are a number of places in his book where taboos (forbidden actions and unthinkable thoughts, in contrast to Socrates' ideal of the examined life) were singled out as a characteristic feature of tribal psychology. Since the clash between Maori *tapu* and secular European society has often figured in New Zealand ethnic conflict (and still does today), that might have been a good example to use in *The Open Society*.

But it was not to be. His classical training and his determination to expose Plato's role in what had gone wrong with the world (the subtitle of Volume One of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is *The Spell of Plato*) meant that Sparta and Athens were where Popper's thoughts about taboo naturally belonged. Above all, Greece was where the first spontaneous transition from tribalism to civilization took place, and the parallels he saw between Sparta and the neotribal ideals of both fascism and communism in 1940 were striking. Fascism and communism were reactionary forms of "arrested tribalism." In a similar way "the ultimate aim that dominated Sparta's policy was an attempt to arrest all change and to return to tribalism." Any attempt of this sort was doomed to failure, for "innocence once lost cannot be regained,"¹⁰ but you could learn a lot from Sparta just the same.

To begin with, the Spartan goal of an "autarchic" (self-sufficient) foreign policy was a caricature of foreign policy Nazi-style. Its first command was to "shut out all foreign influences which might endanger the rigidity of tribal taboos." Equally dangerous was the threat of egalitarianism: where democratic ideas were in conflict with tribalism these had to be firmly suppressed. Protectionism was another area where similarities could be seen, and the cumulative effect of Spartan policy overall was to produce an obsession with power and the maintenance of power—in order to be strong enough to enforce its rules a tribe always needed to strive for mastery, enslaving its neighbors when possible, dominating them when not.¹¹ It all sounds not unlike West African Dahomey.

Popper agreed that tribalism was not the same all the way across the map. There were variations, and the New Zealand Maori represented one of these. But the power of taboo meant that tribal cultures everywhere tended to be cognitively static and incapable of intellectual advance. "When I speak of the rigidity of tribalism I do not mean that no changes can occur in the tribal ways of life. I mean rather that the comparatively infrequent changes have the character of religious conversions or revulsions, or of the introduction of new magical taboos . . ."¹²

The social effect was clear. Within a tribal setting mental life is so dominated by taboos that there is no real equivalent to the moral problems of modern consciousness, let alone the freedom to speculate about good and evil. For Popper the tribal world is a world without doubts, and the average tribesman "will rarely find himself in the

position of doubting how he ought to act. The right way is always determined, though difficulties must be overcome in following it. It is determined by taboos, by magical tribal institutions which can never become objects of critical consideration."¹³ These thoughts then crystalize in a statement which sets out the theme of his book:

the magical or tribal or collectivist society will also be called the *closed society*, and the society in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions, the *open society*.¹⁴

Tribalism and nationalism both embodied the culturally particular—the sort of thing admired by German Romanticism and Isaiah Berlin. Popper, on the other hand, hoped to see nationalism wither away in the years ahead. He had been a Social Democrat in Vienna for two decades, and he remained loyal to some of its ideals. The parochialism of Herder was something he would have found repellent. But the philosophy of Herder's contemporary Immanuel Kant was sympathetic. In fact few words describe Popper's general outlook better than those of Ernest Gellner describing Kant:

It is the universal in man which he revered, not the specific, and certainly not the culturally specific. In such a philosophy, there is no place for the mystique of the idiosyncratic culture. There is in fact hardly any room for culture in the anthropological sense at all.

The Maori Situation

But "culture in the anthropological sense" was very important to the man who was Popper's departmental head in New Zealand, the anthropologist Ivan Sutherland, and Sutherland was soon at loggerheads with his newly arrived lecturer from overseas. A man of missionary impulses, Sutherland was typical of those who spend their earlier years searching for a faith to believe in and a vocation to follow. He first wanted to be a Methodist minister. Then in London he studied under the sociologist and political scientist Graham Wallas. After this he turned to psychology, and by the time of Popper's arrival in New Zealand in 1937 he had become a specialist in Maori affairs. He disapproved of capitalism, deplored the stress and strain of modernity, saw much to be admired in the old communal world, and like Karl Polanyi he looked forward to a socialist future.

Sutherland's books and writings on the Maori were significant. They combined down-to-earth reports on modern conditions with the *sotto voce* promotion of traditional ways. His sympathy with the Maori cause was genuine and not unreasonable. Maori sufferings had indeed been real enough. Land wars in the 1860s had led to large-scale confiscations, and for decades afterward many Maori were demoralized and depressed.

But white settlement in New Zealand had been rather more complicated than today's energetic myth-making suggests. While the settlers had wanted land, thousands of Maoris had also wanted European goods, and both parties behaved much as you'd expect. In the early days Maori chiefs actively encouraged white colonization since they gained both economic benefits and prestige (*mana*) from having whites on their lands. The New Zealand historian James Belich writes:

The settlements employed Maori labour and bought Maori food—initially they had very little agriculture of their own. They provided Maori with a regular source of European goods, as against the sporadic one of ship visits, or even the intermittent and limited supplies provided by trading stations. This was especially important for consumables such as gunpowder, tobacco and sugar. Planting Pakeha instead of potatoes on part of your land made economic sense, as well as boosting *mana* as the latest currency of rivalry.¹⁵

One chief wrote to Governor George Grey in the nineteenth century "offering to sell land and asking him for European settlers direct from England for a larger town." Another chief planned a town big enough to contain 104 European families. A third chief declared: "Should the Pakeha (the white man) wish to purchase land here, encourage him; no matter how small the amount he may offer, take it without hesitation. It is the Pakeha we want here. The Pakeha himself will be ample payment for our land, because we commonly expect to become prosperous through him."¹⁶

Much has been made of large acreages paid for with a few guns or trinkets plus a blanket or two. Belich comments: "The guns, cash, blankets and trinkets laid out or promised at the sale ceremonies were merely a bonus, though sometimes a valued one. Beneath this overt price was a tacit one: an ongoing relationship with the cluster of settler neighbours created, and intended to be created, by the sale."¹⁷

But settler pressure for land never let up. Misunderstandings multiplied. Reckless and rapacious transactions took place—20 million acres of the empty South Island changed hands for £2,000. Gradually, as they came to realize that what was happening was irreversible, Maori resistance grew to both land sales and settlement. War broke out in the 1860s, and in their eventual defeat the Maori were subject to the full confiscatory power of the state. Many had their lands taken from them—the powerful Waikato tribes (who had themselves murderously enslaved and expropriated their neighbors for many years) now found themselves expropriated (but not enslaved) in turn.

Maori who still owned land still wanted the new life. But the economic rules of the game had changed. Trapped in old ways and old habits they were unaware of this. Their communal arrangements made it hard to convert the capital which accrued from the sale of land into permanent productive assets. They never understood how the modern economy worked. High spending on prestige items continued, and chiefly profligacy went uncontrolled. As the nineteenth century drew to an end, after one hundred years of culture contact and the establishment of schools and a modern economy, ostentatious tombstones were being ordered by wealthy Maori, costly bridal dresses made by expensive dressmakers, and buggies bought for chiefly transport: "A buggy became the status symbol of a *rangatira* (chief) . . . Such things cost money, of which land selling was increasingly the easiest source."¹⁸

From Belich's account several things are clear. Underlying the Maori situation was the profound contrast between Maori communal and white individual ownership and rights, between casual and sustained activity directed to the goal of a better life, between the impulsive adoption of some innovation (a plow, a new livestock breed) and continuous technological modernization, all of it aimed at self-improvement by private households and small families within a framework of modern property law. With their erratic incomes communally dispersed, and their land communally owned, Maori could not progress. The emerging pattern of Maori disadvantage rested on irreconcilably opposed forms of landownership, enterprise, and economic understanding. The Big Ditch once again.

This was still the physical situation of Maori in 1940. But what might be called the metaphysical situation of the Maori—in other words, the interpretation of their condition by intellectuals who had

taken it upon themselves to explain the Maori situation in moral terms—was rather different. As active men and women playing their part for better or worse on the historical stage, and making decisions for better or worse on their own behalf, Maori would from now on be increasingly replaced by abstract ciphers, symbolic figures out of Rousseau, brown victims cast in a morality play to illustrate white guilt.

Maori traditions would be idealized beyond recognition. With not a battle or a broken head in sight, let alone cannibal feasts, their culture would be portrayed as something that had been tragically "taken from them" like the land itself. This dual expropriation would then be used to explain every imaginable failing. Colonial history would be rewritten as a purely moral drama of villains and victimhood, while the script for this drama incorporated a common sentimental illusion much favored in progressive circles—the moral superiority of the oppressed.¹⁹

The Strain of Civilization

Throughout his stay in New Zealand, Popper's conflict with Sutherland grew steadily worse. And, as it did so, Sutherland's personality became more disturbed. Upholding the old-time communal Maori past, he recommended preserving it on broadly psychiatric grounds. If Maori were widely regarded as feckless, or lacking in will or direction, he attributed this to the disrupted "equilibrium" of their traditional life. In 1940 in *The Maori People Today* he claimed that they had originally lived in a state of primitive harmony:

When a people is living in a state of established equilibrium with its natural and social environment, and when each generation is inheriting a stable tradition, mind and character are patterned in terms of this tradition and mental and moral stability are thus achieved. This was the state of the Maori people before the advent of Europeans. Mind and character reflect the outward forms of social and cultural life. When these latter are progressively destroyed, as they were in this country, minds progressively disintegrate . . . ²⁰

However sympathetic this may seem, it is little more than the old organic harmony myth once again. In the case of Maori culture it is

amply clear that "the state of established equilibrium with its natural and social environment" never existed—certainly not in pre-European times. That was when wildlife was destroyed on a Herculean scale, and when Maori depredations reduced vital food resources so seriously that there must have been grave economic consequences when the last moa bit the dust and the last seal swam away from the coast.

As indeed there were. After using up all the large birds and mammals, the Polynesians now began to eat each other. "By the fifteenth century the Maori living in the north had begun to build great *pa*, or forts. One function of the *pa* was to protect stores of sweet potato. . . . Another, more fundamental function was to protect people themselves from predation by other hungry humans."²¹ Following these developments came levels of warfare which meant that in any given week a man might or might not be killed, captured, enslaved, or eaten—and a woman raped as well. The landscape of New Zealand resembled medieval Europe. There may not have been mailed knights on horseback, but there were Polynesian castles throughout the land.

No doubt some kind of "mental and moral stability can be achieved" in such circumstances. But one is tempted to retort to Sutherland: shouldn't mental equilibrium be rather more easily achieved under the conditions prevailing in the New Zealand of 1940, with all the provisions of a pioneer welfare state including free medicine, family benefits, education, and universal peace?²²

But this misses the psychological point. Increasingly disturbed, Sutherland was by then a potential suicide who in the years ahead would take his own life. His sympathy for the mental health of the Maori appears inextricably confused with his own deteriorating mental state. When he proposed that they strengthen their traditional communal roots as a solution for their problems, it is possible that a deeper and unacknowledged reason for doing so was a feeling that in the security and protection of Maori community life he too could find relief. It was not the Maori but Sutherland himself who faced disintegration. That is where breakdown loomed.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud notes with a certain ironic surprise the suggestion that our own social arrangements are the source of our discontent. "When we start to consider this pos-

sibility," he writes, "we come across a point of view which is so amazing that we will pause over it. According to it, our so-called civilization itself is to blame for a great part of our misery, and we should be much happier if we were to give it up and go back to primitive conditions."²³ How has this come about? he asks. What explains "this attitude of hostility to civilization"?

He gives two reasons. First there was the effect of voyages of discovery, such as Captain Cook's, when "men came into contact with primitive peoples and races. To the Europeans, who failed to observe them carefully and misunderstood what they saw, these people seemed to lead simple, happy lives—wanting for nothing—such as the travellers who visited them, with all their superior culture, were unable to achieve." This view was baseless ("later experience has corrected this opinion on many points") but it was widely believed, being "erroneously attributed to the absence of the complicated conditions of civilization."²⁴

The second cause of communal yearnings and hostility to the modern world is more recent, writes Freud, and derives from speculation about the origin of neurotic disorders. "It was found that men become neurotic because they cannot tolerate the degree of privation that society imposes on them in virtue of its cultural ideals, and it was supposed that a return to greater possibilities of happiness would ensue if these standards were abolished or greatly relaxed."²⁵

Later than Freud, Popper too suggested that the idealization of tribal life is an unconscious reaction to the "strain of civilization." Acknowledging Freud's contribution, he wrote on the very first page of Volume One of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* that his book "attempts to show that this civilization has not yet fully recovered from the shock of its birth—the transition from the tribal or 'closed society' . . . to the 'open society.'" In Volume Two he wrote again that a fact with "grave political and institutional problems, is that to live in the haven of a tribe, or of a 'community' approaching a tribe, is for many men an emotional necessity," the "strain of civilization" being "partly a result of this unsatisfied emotional need."²⁶ As his last days would soon show, the haven of a tribe was something Sutherland seems to have been seeking too.

Friedrich Hayek had similar things to say about romantic communal yearnings, and although there were wide differences between them, Freud and Hayek and Popper all shared a common theme.

This suggested that the profound emotional longing for the security of a communal environment was a permanent feature of our psychic life—every bit as hard to renounce as the Freudian renunciation of sexuality. Romantic primitivism was no mere midsummer madness. For better or worse Rousseau will be always with us because fantasies about tribal life will never die.

Anthropology and Its Discontents

A combination of cultural anthropology (which tends to normalize the primitive while treating civilization as aberrant) and psychology (which may seek to normalize Freud's "primordial, deeply buried mental states") seems to be a very unstable mix. Some can handle it and some cannot, and the evidence from Margaret Mead on has not been encouraging. Stanley Diamond's claim that anthropology is the most alienated of the professions is also worth noting. This suggests what ordinary observation confirms—that a schadenfreudian delight in the failings of civilization, and deep discontent with its rewards, is for some anthropologists a stronger motive for joining the discipline than a positive interest in tribal life. Fieldwork brings added complications, putting the researcher in a close personal relationship with communities where detachment is hard to maintain. In this situation the anthropologist often softens his portrait of the people he has come to study, idealizes their customs, abandons all objectivity, and jettisons questions of truth and value in the process. The treatment by Benedict of Zuni, and by Mead of Samoa, are only two of innumerable examples.

In Sutherland's day anthropological truth had not yet been relativized as "truth," and facts had not yet been ironized as "facts." But the school of cultural anthropology he belonged to generally denied that civilization was superior to anything else. It therefore denied that there was any reason whatever to celebrate the change from a "closed" to an "open" society. For Sutherland such a distinction would have been either meaningless or false. This being so, need one look any further to explain the intense dislike he came to feel for Popper, and which Popper believed had something to do with Sutherland's suicide?

Opinion differs—some are disinclined to see any connection—but it was an unusual situation. On the one hand the disputatious Popper

was engaged on a magnum opus, *The Open Society*, in which the failings of tribalism were comprehensively laid bare. On the other hand Sutherland was writing papers that were largely a defense of the tribal world and that called for its support. Cause enough, perhaps, for departmental war? Soon Sutherland instigated a campaign of harassment against Popper, eventually alleging to the police that the visiting European was probably an agent of influence for the Axis powers—if not an actual spy. The Viennese philosopher had a thick accent, and to the average New Zealand constable during wartime this was very suspicious.

When the police came to his door Popper was able to dissuade them from making an arrest. But he was shocked at their ignorance, and he was seen the following day carrying armfuls of books down to the police station to bring the officers up-to-date on the real nature of Hitler and the Nazis. For this episode Sutherland was forced to apologize to Popper by the college Rector. And his vendetta intensified from that day on.²⁷

Popper regarded New Zealand as an outpost of the Open Society he admired, years later declaring it to be "the freest country" he knew. Yet it is unlikely that he grasped the complexities of the racial situation. Few Maori lived in Christchurch. Most of them lived elsewhere, and it is quite possible that in 1940 Popper was not well informed about the historical background to their situation. Yet the message he brought remains pertinent today.

If Popper is right, then a discontented nostalgia for the communal is a widespread reaction to the difficulties of modern life, and there is a singular irony in his being tied to a man in New Zealand who embodied that discontent. By 1945, however, relief was in sight. *The Open Society* had been published and he would soon leave for England. In the teeth of Stalin's postwar triumphalism, as if to spite the "revolutionary" governments being imposed by the Red Army in the east, he argued that far and away the most significant historic change had been "the transition from the closed to the open society," and that this itself was "one of the deepest revolutions through which mankind had passed."²⁸

In 1951 Sutherland took his own life. Toward the end he was more and more preoccupied with maintaining Maori traditions, and we are told that he was increasingly drawn into the flesh-and-blood

ives of Maori communities, with all their reciprocal bonds and human responsibilities, "deepening his studies of present day Maori life, on the East Coast with his oldest Ngati Porou friends, in the Waikato and the Urewera, in North Auckland, in Taranaki."²⁹ But whatever support he found there does not finally seem to have been enough.

If it is true that anthropology is the most alienated of the professions, it is equally true that the vocational choice of anthropology is sometimes a signal of personal distress. In addition to this, the conflict between the obligations and duties of the tribal world he studies and the wider civilized world he belongs to sometimes produces a strain in the anthropologist's sense of identity—his sense of who he is and where he belongs and what his duties are—and it would be surprising if this did not play a part in Sutherland's breakdown. When an obituarist wrote that "the strain told," one feels that the split, the crackup, the decision to end it all, came also from conflicting allegiances that had become unmanageable.³⁰ The cause of his fierce personal struggle with Popper and its final crisis might be seen as yet another symptom of the strain of civilization itself.

The Maori People Today

And the Maori People? What has happened to them? Most have got on with their lives and joined the modern world. Everyone knows of the opera singer Kiri Te Kanawa. But thousands like her in much humbler situations have made their own contribution to New Zealand today. However, this is not what you will hear if you visit the country. A local observer writes that "the fact that many Maori run hundreds of highly successful enterprises in the professions, tourism, entertainment, retail, farming and contracting" goes completely unnoticed. Those successfully assimilated to Western commercial life are the very last to attract attention. Indeed they are almost invisible. Instead, educational curricula and numerous governmental publications ceaselessly glorify the Polynesian ways of the past.

It's all very strange. Any visitor to New Zealand can see that modern Maori have the same needs for housing, education, and jobs as everyone else. And given a chance they are just as capable. But as we have already seen in Australia, indigenous attempts to succeed are handicapped by a pervasive hostility to market society across broad

stretches of the white middle class. A miscellaneous army of teachers, academics, government servants, clergy, radical lawyers, progressive judges, journalists, and numerous other *bien pensants* promote the revival of traditional Maori culture even more fanatically than the Maori do themselves. Not of course the blood-stained pre-European Polynesian world. Instead, an unending routine of communal basket-weaving, accompanied by traditional dance and song, seems to be more what they have in mind.

A typical collection of essays provides a glimpse of these attitudes. An Anglican priest rails against "the monocultural grip on all our institutions" that British colonization secured; deplors the "institutional racism" that sees the schools, the broadcasting system, and parliament itself all propagating Western values; commends the way Maori "communal values encourage the sharing of resources"; asserts that "for Maori and many other cultures, spirituality encompasses all things," a fact which means that "instead of destroying millions of acres of natural bush . . . Maori spirituality treats the land and bush as sacred in the first place"; and threatens that unless Maori rights are recognized and appropriate restitution made, Maori will be entitled to "take the law into their own hands."³¹

A teacher says that New Zealand should "hand over the education of Maori children to Maori authorities—probably to tribally based authorities to run tribally based schools . . . The agenda of such schools must be Maori, the methods Maori and Maori *mana* (that is, power and prestige) must be paramount." Ignoring the modern world of the Internet, the need for literacy and numeracy, the ever-increasing pressure for specialized training and technological expertise, he claims that, "It's my bet that with these ingredients" (i.e., a fully tribalized Maori-language education, presumably in a setting of native rain forest, to the singing of native birds) "future Pakeha/whites will have to look to their laurels when it comes to jobs, politics, and every facet of New Zealand life which will truly fulfill the hopes of partnership implicit in the Treaty of Waitangi."³²

Similar goals are embraced by the official policy of "bi-culturalism." This supposedly combines the modern legal and economic arrangements of New Zealand society in general with Maori collectivism, with a revival of tribal social organization, and with the reassertion of communal taboos as forms of pseudo-legal control. It is said that where all else has failed, bi-culturalism will at last achieve

social justice" and "equity" and the alleviation of "economic disparities" between white and black. And if it doesn't . . . ?

Well, then something more muscular may be tried. A recent document from New Zealand's Maori Development Ministry warns that if demands for "rapid improvement" are not met, there may well be violence in the streets. Not of course that either the Maori minister or his ministry advocates violence—not at all. But he and his friends insist that all future New Zealand social policy must ensure that Maori traditions are "fully functioning and respected." The view expressed seems to be that as long as your culture is "respected," then success is inevitable and your bank account will grow.

It is almost as if Sutherland has finally triumphed fifty years after his death. For the analysis he made of Maori problems bears an uncanny resemblance to the psychological insistence on "respecting" Maori culture found today. It is of course absurd to suggest that "respect" for Indian or Chinese culture has anything whatever to do with Indian and Chinese success on the one hand, or Maori failure on the other. (Bitter resentment of Asian immigrant success is expressed in the same government document.)

The reason Chinese and Indians succeed in New Zealand and elsewhere is that they bring with them more successful entrepreneurial cultures, and aim at more successful financial outcomes, which are repeatedly shown to be more successful than communal traditions at achieving the desired results. And as we shall see in the next chapter, the general causes and conditions of cultural success and failure are steadily becoming better known.

PART III

CIVILIZATION AND ITS MALCONTENTS

*The Economic and
Cultural Implications*