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# UNDOING CULTURE

## Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity

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## THE HEROIC LIFE AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The modern hero is no hero; he acts heroes.

(Benjamin, 1973: 97)

Perhaps it is precisely the petit-bourgeois who has the presentiment of the dawn of a new heroism, a heroism both enormous and collective, on the model of arts.

(Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, quoted in de Certeau, 1984: 1)

I do not like heroes, they make too much noise in the world.

(Voltaire, quoted in Gouldner, 1975: 420)

To speak of the heroic life is to risk sounding a little dated. Intellectual and academic life have long sustained strong countercultural traditions which have favoured an anti-heroic ethos. Periodically these traditions have gained greater prominence, for example in the 1960s. The most recent manifestation of this antinomian spirit, postmodernism, has little time for elevating artistic, intellectual and other cultural pursuits to the status of coherent lifestyles capable of making grand statements which will be generally illuminating and instructive. Conceptions such as the artist as hero with their associated notions of genius and a life-ordering sense of calling and mission have given way to a less elevated valuation of the popular and the detritus of everyday mass and consumer cultures. Postmodernism has also been associated with the positive evaluation of local and popular cultures, the minor traditions and the 'otherness' excluded by the universalistic pretension of the modern. This suggests an increasing sensitivity to the more complex levels of unity, to the syncretism, heterogeneity, and the common taken-for-granted, 'seen but unnoticed' aspects of everyday life. Of course, the sociology of everyday life cannot be reduced to an effect of postmodernism. Rather we should regard postmodernism as enhancing tendencies to transform the cultural sphere which gained a strong impetus from the 1960s. The rise of new social movements, feminism, ecology and the increasing significance of leisure and the quest for self-expression and self-realization not only pointed to the capacity to transform the institutions of public life, but also raised the profile of the life left behind. Everyday life, with its focus upon reproduction, maintenance, common routines, the sphere of women, receptivity and sociability has gained impetus with the problematization of the dominant legitimacy of the world of production

with its emphasis upon instrumental rationality, transformation and sacrifice.

If everyday life is usually associated with the mundane, taken-for-granted, commonsense routines which sustain and maintain the fabric of our daily lives, then the heroic life points to the opposite qualities. Here we think of extraordinary deeds, virtuosity, courage, endurance and the capacity to attain distinction. If the very taken-for-grantedness of everyday life means the necessity of subjecting one's activities to practical knowledge and routines whose heterogeneity and lack of systemicity is rarely theorized, then the heroic life cuts a swathe through this dense facticity. It points to an ordered life fashioned by fate or will, in which the everyday is viewed as something to be tamed, resisted or denied, something to be subjugated in the pursuit of a higher purpose.

### Everyday life

More than most sociological concepts 'everyday life' has proved exceedingly difficult to define. This would seem to be because everyday life is the life-world which provides the ultimate ground from which spring all our conceptualizations, definitions and narratives. At the same time, from the perspective of constituted specialist forms of knowledge which have forgotten this, it appears to be a residual category into which can be jettisoned all the irritating bits and pieces which do not fit into orderly thought. Indeed, as commentators are quick to point out, to venture into this field is to explore an aspect of life whose central features apparently lack methodicalness and are particularly resistant to rational categorization (see Geertz, 1983; Heller, 1984; Sharrock and Anderson, 1986; Bovone, 1989; Maffesoli, 1989). Bearing in mind this inherent ambiguity and lack of consensus, we can outline the characteristics most frequently associated with everyday life. First, there is an emphasis upon what happens every day, the routine, repetitive taken-for-granted experiences, beliefs and practices; the mundane ordinary world, untouched by great events and the extraordinary. Second, the everyday is regarded as the sphere of reproduction and maintenance, a pre-institutional zone in which the basic activities which sustain other worlds are performed, largely by women. Third, there is an emphasis upon the present which provides a non-reflexive sense of immersion in the immediacy of current experiences and activities. Fourth, there is a focus on the non-individual embodied sense of being together in spontaneous common activities outside, or in the interstices, of the institutional domains; an emphasis upon common sensuality, being with others in frivolous, playful sociability. Fifth, there is an emphasis upon heterogeneous knowledge, the disorderly babble of many tongues; speech and 'the magic world of voices' are valued over the linearity of writing.

This aspect can be developed by referring to Agnes Heller's discussion

of Plato's contrast between *doxa* (general opinion grounded in daily routines) and *episteme* (scientific knowledge which aims to provide more lasting truths). This can lead us to a relational view of everyday thought with its meaning defined in terms of its opposite modes of thought. Whereas everyday thought is heterogeneous and syncretic, scientific, philosophical and other formalized modes of thought are more systemic, reflexive and de-anthropomorphizing (Heller, 1984: 49ff.). Such more formalized modes of thought themselves can be seen as striving for systemicity, which increasingly separates them from their dependence on the prime symbolic media in which they are grounded.

Alfred Schutz (1962) has referred to the everyday commonsense world as the 'paramount reality' which can be distinguished from a series of 'multiple realities' or 'finite provinces of meaning'. There are the 'worlds' of dreams, fantasies, daydreams, play, fiction and the theatre as well as the more formalized worlds of science, philosophy and art. Each demands a different 'natural attitude', time sense and structure of relevance, and there are problems for individuals who do not observe them. Here it is possible to recall Schutz's (1964) description of the difficulties encountered by Cervantes's *Don Quixote* in mixing together fantasy and everyday life. There are, of course, some socially sanctioned occasions in which such intermixing is encouraged, where the world of fantasy becomes lived out in the midst of everyday life, such as festivals and the carnivalesque. Such liminal moments are usually well circumscribed, yet it can be argued that the syncretic and heterogeneous nature of everyday life means that the perceptions of the doubly-coded, the playful, desires and fantasies lurk within the interstices of everyday life and threaten to irrupt into it.

As Schutz, Garfinkel and the ethnomethodologists remind us, it takes considerable taken-for-granted practical skill to negotiate these various worlds and the transitions between them. It can be added that the capacity to mobilize such a flexible generative structure capable of handling a wide variety and high degree of complexity of finite provinces of meaning cannot be understood as a historical constant. Indeed the nature and number of finite provinces of meaning and their relative separation or embeddedness in everyday life will vary historically. Hence it can be argued that a precise definition of everyday life cannot be given, rather we should seek to understand it as a process – and, as Nietzsche reminds us, that which has a history cannot be defined.

A number of theorists have sought to comprehend the historical processes which have led to the increasing differentiation and colonization of everyday life. The Frankfurt School (Held, 1980) and Lefebvre (1971) have, for example, focused on the commodification and instrumental rationalization of everyday life. Habermas (1981) has elaborated a distinction between system and life-world in which the instrumental rational action employed by the political-administrative and economic systems are seen to invade and erode the emancipatory communicative potential of the everyday life-world. Heller (1984), following Lukács, has

drawn attention to the ways in which the heterogeneity of everyday life has been subjected to processes of homogenization. It is therefore possible to refer to an initial process of differentiation in which science, art, philosophy and other forms of theoretical knowledge originally embedded within everyday life become progressively separated and subjected to specialist development, followed by a further phase whereby this knowledge is fed back in order to rationalize, colonize and homogenize everyday life.

The danger is to assume that this process has a self-propelling momentum and universalizing force which turns it into a logic of history beyond human intervention. Rather, it might be more useful to conceive of it in terms of the changing struggles and interdependencies between figurations of people bound together in particular historical situations in which they seek to mobilize various power resources, than to refer to a logic of history.<sup>1</sup> Elias (1987a) has discussed the process of differentiation whereby specialist functions previously carried out by the group as a whole become separated. Hence there is the emergence of specialists in violence control (warriors), knowledge specialists (priests) and eventually economic and political specialists. It is also possible to trace the emergence of other groups of specialists, such as cultural specialists who participate in the formation of a relatively autonomous cultural sphere in which scientific, philosophical and artistic symbolic media are developed. In addition in modern societies there is the whole array of experts such as those in the helping professions and mass media occupations which supply a variety of means of orientation and practical knowledge for everyday life. This should not be understood as an automatic and orderly process: the particular conditions of a society's state formation, and its relation to the other nation-states in which it is bound in a figuration, determine the actual type and degree of differentiation which may propel and maintain certain groups of specialists in positions of power. Under certain conditions priests may attain a dominant position within society and in other circumstances warriors may become dominant. The nature, extent and duration of their dominance will clearly have an impact upon everyday life.

With the rise of Western modernity cultural specialists such as scientists, artists, intellectuals and academics have gained in relative power and have sought in various ways to advocate the transformation, domestication, civilization, repair and healing of what are considered the shortcomings of everyday life. Yet other cultural specialists have sought to promote and defend the intrinsic qualities of everyday life through the celebration of the integrity of popular cultures and traditions. For them everyday life is less regarded as raw material and 'otherness' ripe for formation and cultivation; rather they can be seen to advocate a reversal of the process of differentiation and a greater awareness of the equal validity, and in some cases even superior wisdom, of everyday knowledge and practices. Hence under certain conditions popular cultures are celebrated and the ordinary

person's mundane life, the life of 'the man without qualities' heroicized. Such processes of de-differentiation, of re-heterogenization and re-immersion into the everyday have featured prominently in countercultural movements such as romanticism and postmodernism. This is also evident in the critique of the heroic image of the cultural specialist, the scientist, artist or intellectual as hero, in favour of an emphasis upon everyday mundane practices which are regarded as equally capable of producing what some want to regard as extraordinary or elevated insights or objectifications.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense the positive or negative evaluation of everyday life can be seen to relate to the way in which its counterconcept is evaluated. For Habermas (1981) the system is the danger to the life-world and its intrusions must be controlled if the capacity for everyday life to open up its communicative potential is to be realized. Lefebvre (1971) also emphasizes the need to go beyond the commodification of contemporary everyday life in the 'bureaucratic society of controlled consumption' and release the festive aspects of everyday life. The positive evaluation of the qualities of everyday life are highlighted in Maffesoli's (1989) work in which he draws attention to the capacity of everyday life to resist the process of rationalization and preserve and foster sociality, a concern for the present, the frivolous, imaginative and Dionysiac forms of life which provide a sense of collective immersion, of giving up one's own individual being (*Einfühlung*). In a similar way de Certeau (1984) affirms the ordinary practices of everyday life and its capacity to utilize modes of syncretism, the 'non-logical logics' of everyday life to oppose, transgress and subvert official dominant cultures and technical rationality.<sup>3</sup> Likewise Gouldner (1975: 421) seeks to draw attention to the critical potential of everyday life and the way in which it can function as a counterconcept:

I have suggested repeatedly that EDL [everyday life] is a counterconcept, that it gives expression to a critique of a certain kind of life, specifically, the heroic, achieving, performance-centred existence. The EDL established itself as real by contrasting itself with the heroic life and by reason of the crisis of the heroic life.

As we have suggested, there are a range of counterconcepts against which everyday life can be defined; we will now turn to what can be considered the major one, the heroic life and the ways in which it becomes transformed and transfigured in other modes of life in the cultural sphere.

#### The heroic life

If everyday life revolves around the mundane, taken for granted and ordinary, then the heroic life points to its rejection of this order for the extraordinary life which not only threatens the possibility of returning to everyday routines, but entails the deliberate risking of life itself. The emphasis in the heroic life is on the courage to struggle and achieve extraordinary goals, the quest for virtue, glory and fame, which contrasts

with the lesser everyday pursuit of wealth, property and earthly love. The everyday world is the one which the hero departs from, leaving behind the sphere of care and maintenance (women, children and the old), only to return to its acclaim should his tasks be completed successfully. A basic contrast, then, is that the heroic life is the sphere of danger, violence and the courting of risk whereas everyday life is the sphere of women, reproduction and care. The heroic life is one in which the hero seeks to prove himself by displaying courage. Warriors were amongst the first heroes, and as specialists in violence they experienced the intense excitement of combat, an emotional force which needed to be controlled and subjected to the cunning of instrumental reason to ensure survival.<sup>4</sup> To achieve great deeds requires both luck, a sense of destiny, that one's particular quest and life are driven by forces outside oneself which offer extraordinary protection, and an inner sense of certainty that with circumspection, craft and compulsion one can overcome the greatest dangers and misfortunes: in effect that one can make one's own fate.

In many ways the heroic life shares the quality of an adventure, or series of adventures. Georg Simmel (1971a) in his essay on the adventure tells us that the adventure falls outside the usual continuity of everyday existence which is disregarded on principle. The adventurer has a different time sense which entails a strong sense of the present and disregard for the future. Simmel captures well the mixture of abandoning oneself to fate and making one's own fate we have spoken of. In the adventure we abandon ourselves to the 'powers and accidents of the world, which can delight us, but in the same breath can also destroy us' (Simmel, 1971a: 193). At the same time we forsake the careful calculation and accumulation of the world of work, for the capacity to act decisively in the world. Hence the adventurer 'has the gesture of the conqueror' who is quick to seize the opportunity and also 'treats the incalculable elements in life in the way we ordinarily treat only what we think by definition calculable' (Simmel, 1971a: 193). Furthermore the adventurer is capable of creating a sense of unity, a synthesis of activity and passivity, of chance and necessity. The adventurer makes a system out of his life's lack of system. It is this capacity to form life that points to the affinity between the adventurer and the artist, as well as the attraction of adventure for the artist. As Simmel (1971a: 189) remarks:

the essence of the work of art is, after all, that it cuts out a piece of the endless continuous sequences of perceived experience, detaching it from all connections with one side or the other, giving it a self-sufficient form as though defined and held together by an inner core. A part of existence, interwoven with the uninterruptedness of that existence, yet nevertheless felt as a whole, as an integrated unit - that is the form common to both the work of art and the adventure.

In some cases life as a whole may be perceived as an adventure and for this to happen 'one must sense above its totality a higher unity, a super-life, as it were' (Simmel, 1971a: 192). This capacity to order and unify life,

to form it from within in terms of some higher purpose which gives life a sense of destiny, it can be argued, is central to the heroic life, especially those who are in Simmel's words 'adventurers of the spirit': intellectuals and artists. The way in which the adventure is lived from within like a narrative which has a beginning, middle and end points to the way life may seem to be like a work of art.<sup>5</sup>

In retrospect the adventure may appear to have a particularly compelling dreamlike quality in which accidental elements and inspired acts are woven together to give a strong sense of coherence. This capacity to retrospectively impose a narrative structure on the adventure should not be taken to imply that the original life 'beneath' the narrative was itself formless. Rather it is important to emphasize the potential to deliberately seek to live life as a unity from within and control and shape chance elements into a structure which seemingly serves some higher purpose, be it one's own glory, God's will, the survival of a nation or people. MacIntyre (1981: 191ff.) emphasizes this point when he argues against the existentialism of Sartre and the sociological theories of Goffman and Dahrendorf who present the enactments of an individual life as a series of unconnected episodes. We find, for example, that Sartre's character Antoine Roquentin in *Nausea* argues that to present human life in the form of a narrative is always to falsify it (MacIntyre, 1981: 199). This approach is also evident in Merleau-Ponty's (1964b) statement in the introduction to *Sense and Non-Sense* that at each stage of our lives we are for all intents and purposes separate persons which have happened 'accidentally' to inhabit the same body and whose various distinct selves become retrospectively woven together through a 'false' narrative which gives biographical unity. Indeed this 'liquidation of the self' into a set of separate situational role players also resonates with the emphasis in postmodern theories on the decentring of the self and the presentation of the person as a bundle of loosely connected quasi-selves (see the discussion in the previous chapter).

For MacIntyre (1981: 197) this misses the point that human actions are enacted narratives; narratives are not imposed upon events which have no narrative order by novelists and dramatists. He quotes Barbara Hardy, who remarks that 'we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative'. Yet the extent to which a larger narrative is employed and sustained to structure and unify a person's life as a whole can vary a great deal. We describe a person as displaying character or personality who achieves a high degree of consistency of conduct; in effect he seeks to impose a form on his life by seeking to follow some higher purpose rather than merely letting his life drift capriciously.

At this stage it might be useful to clarify the distinction between the hero, the heroic life and the heroic society. It is of course possible for anyone to become a hero, to perform a heroic deed without being a

member of a heroic society or having a commitment to the heroic life. Hence in the popular media there is a constant celebration of ordinary heroes, those individuals who are thrust into a situation of extreme physical danger in which they show extraordinary courage such as risking or sacrificing their lives to save other people. It is this chance element – that fate might intervene and shatter the everyday order of the happy life and thrust any individual into a situation beyond his or her control – which demands a response, which is fascinating to the public, who cannot but help wonder, 'How would we respond to the test?' This can also be related to hero worship: the ways in which heroes are used as role models for people to identify with (see Klapp, 1969). In this case it is usually some strong person, politician, sportsman, explorer, adventurer, or those who increasingly represent these ways of life, the celebrities and stars of film, television and popular music, who becomes the object of various blends of fantasy and realistic identification.

This can be contrasted with heroic societies such as those described in the Homeric epics or the Icelandic and Irish sagas. Whatever the actual conditions of production of these heroic narratives and their relationship to particular social realities, they provide a picture of social orders in which a person's role and status and associated duties and privileges were well defined within kinship and household structures. Such societies do not admit the possibility of a disjunction between motive and action, as MacIntyre comments (1981: 115): 'A man in heroic society is what he does.' Courage was a central quality necessary to sustain a household and a community, for the courageous person was one who could be relied upon, something which was an important element in friendship. For the Greeks the hero not only displayed courage, but sought to live up to the ideal of *areté*,<sup>6</sup> a term which is often mistakenly translated as 'virtue', but is better rendered as 'excellence' (Kitto, 1951: 171ff.). The heroic ideal was to attain excellence in all the ways in which a man can be excellent – physically, morally, intellectually, practically – without any privileging of the mind over the body. The individual who excelled in battle or contest was accorded the recognition of *kudos*, or glory, by his community (MacIntyre, 1981: 115). Yet while the hero is one who lives within a fragile world in which he is vulnerable to fate and death and can display courage in face of his destiny, he is effectively seeking to live up to an ideal of excellence which is a social role. Hence in heroic societies, the heroic person is one who excels at the performance of a necessary social role.

What is interesting is the way in which the image of the hero is taken out of its context, and woven into a heroic life in which the social context becomes played down, or becomes one in which the hero distinguishes himself from and rises above the social. The influential reading of the Greek past in which a particular late nineteenth-century vision of distinction and individuality is blended together with elements from Greek heroic society became a compelling image in the writings of Nietzsche, an image which MacIntyre (1981: 122) finds particularly misleading:

What Nietzsche portrays is aristocratic *self-assertion*: what Homer and the sagas show are forms of assertion proper to and required by a certain *role*. The self becomes what it is in heroic societies only in and through its role; it is a social creation, not an individual one. Hence when Nietzsche projects back on to the archaic past his own nineteenth-century individualism, he reveals that what looked like an historical enquiry was actually an inventive literary construction. Nietzsche replaces the fictions of the Enlightenment individualism, of which he is so contemptuous, with a set of individualist fictions of his own.

MacIntyre's assertion that Nietzsche's version of the heroic life was a projection of nineteenth-century individualism might be more precisely formulated to highlight the tension between the higher person who displays genuine individuality and distinction (*Vornehmheit*) and the narrow *ressentiment* of the mass man. Furthermore Nietzsche's version of the heroic life did not merely remain as a set of individualist fictions: his particular fiction resonated strongly with notions of artistic and intellectual distinction which gained impetus from the life of Goethe and the Romantic Movement, to develop into a powerful cultural image, one which became influential in certain circles of turn of the century Germany and was subjected to sociological investigation and theoretical formulation by Max Weber and Georg Simmel.<sup>7</sup>

#### Hero ethics, distinction and the cultural sphere

Max Weber's life and work have often been characterized as heroic. Manasse (1957: 287), for example, remarks that he was a 'type of man who was born in the world of Homer and of the Jewish prophets and has not yet disappeared with Nietzsche. Thus far he had his last great representative in Max Weber.' Manasse's statement was made in the context of a discussion of the impact of Weber on Karl Jaspers. For Jaspers, Weber represented an extraordinary man, driven by a restless demonic force animated by a strong ethic of responsibility. This was manifest in Weber's honesty and consistency of purpose which was expressed in his work, the directness and lack of pretence in his life activities and dealings with other people and in his bodily gestures, bearing and demeanour. Jaspers regarded Weber as a representative of a new type of man and made him the model for his existential philosophy. This modern form of heroism is captured not only in the courage, consistency and unity of purpose Weber attained, but in a quality frequently associated with the heroic life: sacrifice. Without seeking immediate death this type of person 'lived as though they were dead' (Manasse, 1957: 389).

Such questions were, of course, addressed by Weber in his writings. In his discussion of charisma he refers to the capacity for sacrifice displayed by the charismatic leader and demanded of his followers. The charismatic hero's power does not lie in a legitimized social role, but in his extraordinary qualities as a person, the 'gift of grace' and the capacity to

constantly subject it to demonstration and test. As Weber (1948d: 249) remarks, 'If he wants to be a prophet, he must perform miracles; if he wants to be a war lord, he must perform heroic deeds.'<sup>8</sup> Such individuals intentionally organized their lives around an ultimate value and were therefore less dependent upon conventional modes of social approval and institutional authority. The injunction to follow some ideal or ultimate value, to form life into a deliberate unity whatever the personal cost, is also central to Weber's discussion of 'hero ethics'. He states:

One can divide all 'ethics', regardless of their material content into two major groups according to whether they make basic demands on a person to which he can generally *not* live up except for the great high points of his life, which point the way as guideposts in his *striving* in infinity ('hero ethics'), or whether they are modest enough to accept his everyday 'nature' as a maximal requirement ('average ethics'). It seems to me that only the first category, the 'hero ethics', can be called 'idealism'. (Weber's comments on an essay by Otto Gross, quoted in Marianne Weber, 1975: 378)

Weber was later to qualify this strict dichotomy between 'hero ethics' and 'average ethics' to admit a more nuanced gradation. As Marianne Weber (1975: 388) tells us, his new insight was that 'there is a scale of the ethical. If the ethically highest is unattainable in a concrete case, an attempt must be made to attain the second or third best.' This can be related to the discussion of the various modern life-orders that had replaced the possibility of an ethical totality and unified personality which were associated with Puritanism. The process of differentiation has resulted in separate economic, political, aesthetic, erotic, intellectual and academic life-orders (Weber, 1948c). Yet despite his heroic defence of science as a vocation and the ethic of responsibility as valid ways of living in the modern world, there is no sense for Weber that, in a cultural context of value pluralism, they could provide a sense of certainty and solutions to the problems of coherent meaning. The same could be said of the ways of life offered by the other life-orders in the cultural sphere: the aesthetic, intellectual and erotic. For Weber the general process of rationalization signified the decline in the possibility of developing into a genuine person, a unified personality who displays consistency of conduct and who can attain distinction which is captured in the Protestant idea of *Persönlichkeit*, an ideal which Weber sought to uphold throughout his life.<sup>9</sup>

Weber gives qualified acknowledgement to the idea that the artist, intellectual and erotic life-orders could develop personalities, albeit 'lesser' ones, and with progressive difficulty. In this sense it would be legitimate to investigate the artist as hero and examine, for example, the extent to which particular artists in specific social figurations (figures such as Goethe, Beethoven, Berlioz, Flaubert, van Gogh) were sustained by lifestyles and prestige economies which favoured the development of 'hero ethics'. In a similar way one could investigate the notion of the intellectual as hero and examine, for example, figures such as Marx, Zola or Sartre. Further categories suggest themselves in terms of the erotic life in social forms such

as bohémias and countercultures (Otto Gross), and the turning of life itself into a work of art in dandyism and other modes (Beau Brummell, Huysmans's *des Esseintes*, Oscar Wilde, Stefan George, Salvador Dali, etc.).

From Weber's perspective all these various manifestations of the heroic life within the cultural sphere tended to create an 'unbrotherly aristocracy' independent of personal ethical qualities, yet such a cultural aristocracy would best be sustained within a relatively independent cultural sphere. At one point Weber speaks of an intellectual aristocracy of independent *rentiers*, yet the specific conditions which had developed to favour this with the formation of the cultural sphere could be equally threatened by the deformation of the cultural sphere and the loss of the relative autonomy of cultural producers. On the one hand, this process could be related to the processes of rationalization, bureaucratization and commodification which changed the conditions of production and relation to their various publics of artists, intellectuals, academics and other cultural vocations. On the other hand, it could be described in terms of a perceived process of engulfment from below, the rise of the masses and their culture (Theweleit, 1987).

The latter viewpoint finds one of its clearest expressions in the writings of Max Scheler, who fretted about the *ressentiment* of the common man, who is poisoned by the repressed emotions of envy, spite, hatred and revenge and seeks to dismantle the social hierarchy between him and his betters and destroy those noble values that he does not possess (see Staude, 1967). Scheler sought a return to aristocratic values, some new 'spiritual aristocracy' for the modern age to re-establish noble and heroic models of life through the youth movements. Like Weber, Simmel and many of the generation which dominated German academic life around the turn of the century, Scheler was strongly influenced by Nietzsche's work. Yet of the three, Simmel was the only one who did not take up some form of nostalgic reaction to modernity and the prospective eclipse of the heroic life. Simmel's sociology of modernity pointed to the opposite outcome: it provided a completely new modern ideal of distinction (*Vornehmheit*) which for our purposes deserves examination for it suggests the persistence of a form of the heroic life.

It has often been remarked that whereas Simmel favoured the aesthetic way of being, Weber favoured the ethical (see for example Green, 1988). Both pointed to the differentiation and fragmentation of modern life, yet Simmel (1978) developed a more positive appreciation of the possibilities for an aestheticization of life released by the very capitalist money economy which many held was destructive of art and culture. While it is possible to point to a general aestheticization of everyday life in the large cities of the late nineteenth century (see Featherstone, 1991a: Ch. 5), the effects of the money economy on the development of personality have usually been regarded as negative. Simmel refers to the capacity of money to turn everything which has a specific quality into quantity, prostitution

being a good example of this process of commodification, which points to the deformation of the person.

It is, however, one of the merits of his *Wechselwirkung* interaction approach, which points to the dense network of reciprocal interactions that make up the social world, that it provides unusual insights into how things usually held apart influence each other (e.g. culture on the economy, not just the economy on culture). Hence the processes of the levelling of distinct differences and the quantification of everyday life through the expansion of the money economy is presented as capable of provoking an opposite reaction: the determination to preserve and develop one's essential quality as a person which Simmel (1978: 389ff.) referred to as *Vornehmheitsideal*, the ideal of distinction. Liebersohn (1988: 141) remarks that 'Simmel argued that the modern ideal of distinction was an absolutely new value brought into existence by the challenge to personal values of the money economy.' According to Liebersohn, Simmel took the ideal of distinction from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here Nietzsche argues that the distinctive type of man has developed in aristocratic societies with their rigid social hierarchy and well-defined differences which can supply the 'pathos of distance' whereby the ruling caste can look down on, and keep its distance from the rest.<sup>10</sup> For Simmel (1986: 168-9) this 'social aristocraticism' and 'morality of nobility' advocated by Nietzsche meant the employment of discipline and a sense of duty, a severity and 'selfishness in the preservation of the highest personal values'. Yet self-responsibility should not be confused with egoism and hedonism, for in the ideal of distinction or personalism: 'Egoism aspires to have something, personalism to be something.'

Liebersohn (1988: 143) captures well the characteristics of the modern form of distinction when he states that

The person of distinction was possessed by a sense of the absolute worth of his soul without regard for the world and was ready to sacrifice everything to remain true to himself. His distinction supposedly asserts his independence from society. Yet paradoxically it shared modern society's impersonality. If impersonality signified the shifting effects or institutions and conventions on individual idiosyncrasies, *Vornehmheit's* inner law, too, eradicated every spontaneous impulse in the name of an artificial order. Absolute personal autonomy offset the social order only by internalizing its logic, creating, to be sure, a style setting the bearer apart, but doing so only through a pattern or radical repression. This was the price one paid for turning the modern fate into a personal destiny.

There are clear resemblances here with Weber's Protestant and Kantian ideal of *Persönlichkeit*, which suggest that the ethical and aesthetic ideals are not so easily separated as some would like. Yet Weber held that *Persönlichkeit*, which had its origins in traditional Christianity, was increasingly becoming less tenable in the modern age, whereas Simmel's concept of *Vornehmheit*, which depended upon social differentiation, could never have existed in a traditional community.<sup>11</sup>

### Women, consumer culture and the critique of the heroic life

The critique of everyday life is not a new phenomenon. As Gouldner (1975: 419) informs us, the critique of everyday life was evident in the literature of the Ancient Greeks. Euripides, for example, stood on the side of the common people, the world of women, children, old people and slaves. He called for the rejection of power, fame, ambition, physical courage and virtue, the essential features of the heroic life. The growth in the power potential of outsider groups such as women, the young, the elderly and ethnic and regional minorities has been part of a long-term process within Western modernity – something which some want to refer to as postmodernism and characterize as a significant cultural shift – and has led to an assault on the heroic life.

A key element in the current critique of the viability of the heroic life in the modern age has been provided by feminism, which regards the heroic life as extolling the essentially masculine virtues of sacrifice, distinction, discipline, dignity, self-denial, self-restraint and commitment to a cause. In her extensive critique of Max Weber's commitment to the heroic life, Roslyn Bologh (1990: 17) remarks:

If I had to encapsulate all of these ideas into an image it would be that of the strong, stoic, resolutely independent, self-disciplined individual who holds himself erect with self-control, proud of his capacity to distance himself from his body, from personal longings, personal possessions and personal relationships, to resist and renounce the temptations of pleasure in order to serve some impersonal cause – a masculine, ascetic image. The image of devotion to some impersonal cause can be interpreted as rationalizing and justifying self-repression while channeling the aggressive, competitive, jealous, angry feelings that accompany such repression.

Against this masculine ideal of manliness and aggressive will to power, Bologh presents a feminine image of passivity and the acceptance of powerlessness. This lack of power is accompanied by a sense of vulnerability and desire for attachment, to be loved by others. The masculine heroic image requires the suppression of vanity: in effect, recognition and glory should only be expected with the ultimate resolution of the quest. Hence the individual who follows the heroic life should be indifferent to hero worship, recognition and the love of others. The feminine ethic operates on the basis of a more prosaic desire for reciprocity in the love of the other, it accepts the emotional bonding with the other, identification and empathy. It assumes that erotic love can be maintained within everyday life, that it is possible to move to and fro from attachment to separation, from communion to differentiation within the same relationship. Bologh (1990: 213ff.) therefore advocates an ethic of sociability against hero ethics which is less elevated, and more open to an egalitarian exploration of playfulness and pleasure with the other, to the immersion and loss of the self rather than the preservation and elevation of the self. Sociability was, of course, one of the characteristic features of everyday

life which we discussed earlier. To speak of sociability is immediately to recall the work of Georg Simmel and his influential essay on the topic. Sociability – '*the play-form of association*' (Simmel, 1971b: 130) – entailed the setting aside of the normal status and objective qualities of the personality and is essentially a form of interaction between equals, without any obvious purpose or set content, in which talk and light playfulness becomes an end in itself. It is a further example of Simmel's *Wechselwirkung* approach, with its capacity to tease out unusual insights from seemingly contradictory perceptions, that in discussing the responses to the contradictions of modern culture, he not only pointed to the possibility of *Vornehmheit*, aesthetic responses and the detachment of turning life into a work of art, but pointed to an opposite response through the immersion in playful sociability. A further response which Simmel developed in the face of the tremendous expansion of objective culture and the oppressive weight of cultural forms was the affirmation of life itself. Life, the formless form, provided a sense of immersion and loss of self in the immediacy of experiences; it also proved to be a central preoccupation within cultural modernism with its fascination with the prosaic, the ordinary and the everyday (e.g. surrealism) which favoured an anti-heroic ethos and heroization of the mundane which sharply contrasts with the heroic life (Featherstone, 1991b).

The twentieth-century consumer cultures which developed in Western societies, with their expanded means of technical production of goods and reproduction of images and information, constantly play back these possibilities. Consumer culture does not put forward a unitary message. The heroic life is still an important image in this culture, and as long as there still exists interpersonal violence and warfare between states there is a firm basis for the preservation of this image, as the risking of life, self-sacrifice and commitment to a cause are still important themes sustained within male culture. Here one thinks of the discussion of the heroic military culture of extraordinary men who became involved in the development of the space programme of the United States described by Tom Wolfe in *The Right Stuff* (1989). At the same time consumer culture puts out mythical hero images of the Superman and Rambo type, as well as pastiches and parodies of the whole heroic tradition such as the film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and various blends of both such as are found in the Indiana Jones films.

The twentieth century, however, has also seen the development of a strong anti-heroic ethos fostered by cultural modernism's antinomian movement away from notions of artistic and intellectual genius<sup>12</sup> and the retreat from life into art, to favour a blurring of the boundaries between art and everyday life which has been enhanced by surrealism, Dada and postmodernism.<sup>13</sup> Consumer culture has enhanced this aestheticization of everyday life through the development of advertising, imagery and publicity which saturate the fabric of the lived environment and everyday encounters.



The decline of hero ethics also suggests a feminization of culture. Not that patriarchy and male supremacy have been eclipsed – far from it. But there has been a long-term swing of the balance of power between the sexes (Elias, 1987b) which has become more marked over the last century and has seen a rise in the power potential of women, one symptom of which has been their increased prominence and ability to raise questions in the public sphere about male domination, domestic violence and child abuse, issues which formerly could not be admitted.

In the cultural sphere one manifestation of this relative shift in the balance of power has been the movement to accord greater legitimacy to everyday culture, the cultural pursuits of women such as popular romance and soap operas. These areas of popular and mass culture and the whole area of women's everyday culture which revolves around the production and management of consumption, areas which were previously seen as peripheral in contrast to the perceived centrality of production and stratification, are being subjected to more intense study by social scientists and students of the humanities, and hence are gaining in legitimacy. Yet if this provides an alternative set of mass cultural images to those of the heroic life, to what extent does it suggest possibilities for new heroes and heroines? How far do Hollywood and media stars and celebrities provide extensions of Simmel's model of distinction or Weber's notions of *Persönlichkeit* and charisma? Is it possible to discuss these issues in a relatively detached way without making the judgement that they can only achieve the status of regressions, pale imitations of the heroic life?

It has been remarked that mass culture has often been associated with women and real authentic culture with men (Huysen, 1986: 47). Certainly in Nietzsche's view the masses, the herd, are perceived as feminine, in contrast to the artist or philosopher as hero who displays masculine characteristics. As Huysen (1986: 52) remarks, an examination of European magazines and newspapers of the late nineteenth century would show that

the proletarian and petit-bourgeois were persistently described in terms of a feminine threat. Images of the raving mob as hysterical, of the engulfing floods of revolt and revolution, of the swamp of big city life, of the spreading ooze of massification, of the figure of the red whore at the barricades – all of these pervade the writings of the mainstream of the media.<sup>14</sup>

Nietzsche provides a further indication of the association of femininity and mass culture in his hostility towards theatricality, shown, for example, in his writings on the Wagner cult. In *The Gay Science* he also writes that 'It is impossible to dissociate the questions of art, style and truth from the question of women' (quoted in Sayre, 1989: 145). For Nietzsche and, following him, for Weber and Simmel the genuine heroic person was characterized not by what they do, but by what they are – the qualities are within the person and hence genuine personality is a matter of fate. Weber, for example, held in contempt the development of the modern notion of personality which is associated with mask-wearing and celebrity.

Yet within the consumer culture which developed in the twentieth century, the new popular heroes were less likely to be warriors, statesmen, explorers, inventors or scientists and more likely to be celebrities, albeit that some of the celebrities would be film stars who would play the role of these former heroes. Lowenthal (1961: 116) reminds us that whereas in the past heroes were 'idols of production', now they are 'idols of consumption'. The characteristic demanded of celebrities is to have *personality*, to possess the actor's skills of presenting a colourful self, to maintain allure, fascination and mystery. These are seen to replace the more traditional virtues of *character*, which emphasized moral consistency, sincerity and unity of purpose. Kasson (1990) has detected a shift in etiquette books in late nineteenth-century America from proclaiming the virtues of moral character to acting as guides for individuals who must learn to read and portray techniques of self-presentation in a complex urban environment with the ever present possibility of deception. The perception of the self as a series of dramatic effects, of learned techniques as opposed to inherent good moral characteristics, leads to a problematization and fragmentation of the self.

Today's stars in the motion picture, television and popular music industries (Dyer, 1979; Frith and Horne, 1987; Gledhill, 1991) would therefore appear to be a long way from the heroic life. But need this be the whole story? Does not this judgement show a nostalgia for a particular formulation of the heroic life, one which penalizes women and mass culture in allowing men to achieve heroism through high cultural pursuits? To answer this question we would need to investigate more closely the formation of consumer culture stars and celebrities in particular contexts. It might be, for example, that the position of monopolization achieved by the Hollywood studio system in the 1930s was able to support lifestyles akin to those of the artist as hero, or artists of life. Moreover, the major contemporary 'superstar' Madonna has been instrumental in developing a different type of femininity which is more self-confident and assertive as well as attempting to redefine her performances as art rather than popular music. Such crossovers (Walker, 1987) may suggest that while the end of art, the end of the intellectuals and the avant-garde have been proclaimed interesting new possibilities could have been developing in the twentieth century which present new variations on the heroic life – that is, if one still accepts that we do not yet live in a postmodern 'retro' or playback culture and that the long-term processes of cultural formation, deformation and reformation can still be sustained.

#### Notes

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1. Here we think for example of Heller's (1978) study of the ways in which art, philosophy and science were separated from everyday life and used to criticize it. At the same time she points to the ways in which science percolated down into everybody's daily life and the way in which there were moves to humanize and aestheticize everyday life. Elias's (1978, 1982) investigation of the 'civilizing process' in Western Europe points to the complex interplay between the production of expert knowledge (e.g. manners books) and its utilization and dissemination by various groups of people bound together through the dynamic of state formation processes, to alter the nature of everyday practices.

2. For discussion of the everyday routines of science and the way they operate to produce various notions of 'truth' and 'results' see Knorr-Cetina (1981) and Latour (1987).

3. Traces of this positive evaluation of everyday life by Maffesoli and de Certeau can be found in the writings of Baudrillard. In particular there is his affirmation of the cynical and 'mirror-like' capacity of the masses to resist absorption and manipulation by the mass media (see Baudrillard, 1983b).

4. See on this Horkheimer and Adorno's (1972) discussion of the development of enlightened reason in Homer's Odysseus, the Greek hero who risks his life in the pursuit of glory and who eventually survives to return home to the little pleasures of the settled and ordered everyday life. Odysseus is presented as the prototype of the bourgeois individual.

5. Those individuals who deliberately seek to make of their own life and persona a work of art and aestheticize life (e.g. the dandy) will be discussed below.

6. The assumption that *areté* was a quality of the body and bodily activities as well as those of the mind implied a unity of the aesthetic, the moral and the practical. For the Greeks *areté* entailed an aesthetic dimension: activities or lives which displayed excellence were assumed to be beautiful and as a corollary those which were base or disgraceful were ugly (Kitto, 1951: 170; see also Bauman, 1973: 10-17, for an illuminating discussion of the Greek notion of culture). Despite the much remarked upon Western mind-body dualism, the sense of the way they are practically conjoined and the beautiful body goes along with a beautiful soul is an important aspect of our tradition as well. Wittgenstein for example, remarks: 'The human body is the best picture of the human soul', an assumption of unity which has a dynamic life-course aspect as Orwell's statement that 'At 50 everyone has the face he deserves' reminds us (quoted in MacIntyre, 1981: 176).

7. The impact of the First World War is particularly interesting in this context with the interplay of technology, traditional military heroics and various artistic impulses and movements. In addition there was the overall tension between the heroic public imagery and the 'everyday' experience of trench warfare as filth, degradation and terror (see Wohl, 1980; Fussell, 1982; Eckstein, 1990). The various shifts in Simmel's attitude towards the war are discussed in Watier (1991).

8. There is not the space here to go into the relationship between the emotional basis of charisma and the heroic life. For discussions see Wasielewski (1985) and Lindholm (1990). Needless to say there has been a good deal of controversy about the extent to which Weber himself admired the charismatic hero (in some cases with the qualifier 'despite himself'). Hence Lindholm's (1990: 27) statement that 'Thus Weber, the most sophisticated and disenchanting of rational thinkers, fell prey in the last analysis, and very much despite himself, to a desperate worship of the charismatic hero' is hardly uncontentious.

9. Weber's pessimism about the fate of *Persönlichkeit* in the modern age and concern about the newly emerging human type to replace the Protestant type was by no means unqualified. This is apparent in his discussions of the working class. At some points he argues that with the decline of religion, non-elites will find meaning through identification with their communities, through the multiplicity of communal groups with bonds of varying intensity, the most important of which is the nation. Hence 'ethnic honour' with its exclusivity and egalitarianism could provide a sense of identity for the masses, while elites strive adequately

to follow a professional vocation or some diluted notion of *Persönlichkeit* (see Portis, 1973: 117). On the other hand he was intrigued by the results of Gohre's study of the working class which suggested that they had discovered a primitive *Persönlichkeit* manifest in a longing for freedom from residual feudal bonds. This provided a motivation for Weber's proposed study of the press and the question of the effect of the mass media on habitus formation (see Liebersohn, 1988).

10. This is not of course the only ideal Nietzsche presents and in recent years, under the influence of poststructuralism and postmodernism, the Dionysian loss of self and immersion in life as mentioned in *The Birth of Tragedy* has gained favour (see Staught and Turner, 1988b).

11. For Simmel, Stefan George embodied the modern ideal of attaining distinction. Max Weber, on the other hand, was concerned about the folly of trying to reintroduce charisma in modern societies. Liebersohn (1988: 151) tells us that George was one of the first cultural heroes of the twentieth century and was accorded the adulation later to be experienced by film stars and politicians.

12. Postmodern theory has little time for notions such as genius and originality. Rosalind Krauss (1984), for example, argues that modernism and the avant-garde work within a 'discourse of originality' which wrongly suppresses the right of the copy and repetition. For a critique arguing that she herself inadvertently reiterates the discourse of originality see Gooding-Williams (1987). Scheff (1990) has developed an acute sociological theory of the development of genius. For a discussion of the various historical forms of the idea of genius see P. Moore (1989) and Battersby (1989). The latter provides an important discussion of the ways in which women have been excluded from the idea of genius.

13. This is not to say that the anti-hero cannot himself be sustained by and develop within a form of the heroic life which is particularly compelling and exemplary for a wide following. Jean-Paul Sartre's life is a major example of this (see Brombert, 1960; Bourdieu, 1980).

14. Huyssen (1986: 59) regards the positive evaluation of the masses and the popular and everyday life by postmodernism as associated with the emergence of feminism and women as a major power in the arts which has led to the admittance and re-evaluation of formerly excluded genres (soap operas, popular romance, the decorative arts and crafts, etc.).