PART 1

Culture as Freedom: Territorializations and Deterritorializations

1

THE RATIONALITY OF LIFE: ON THE ORGANISMIC METAPHOR OF THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BODY

MYTHS OF THE ORGANIC COMMUNITY

In "What Is a Nation?" (1882), Ernest Renan provides an exemplary definition:

> The nation, like an individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. . . . A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future.[1]

As the subject and object of a common inheritance that requires repeated affirmation, the nation is a quasi-natural force from the past that constrains the present and future actions of its members. As a personality in its own right, it exacts sacrifice from them. Renan thus unintentionally captures for posterity the two fundamental characteristics of the idea of organic community. We are told often enough that the nation holds itself together by means of atavistic hallucinations and the violent and oppressive subordination of its members to the larger whole. Accordingly, the idea of organic community is often associated with "bad" nationalism—

1. "What Is a Nation?" trans. Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration,* ed. Homi Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 19. Hereafter cited in the text as "WN."

the Prusso-Germanic nationalism of Bismarck, the National Socialism of Hitler, ethnic fundamentalism and cultural chauvinism in decolonized Asia and Africa, and with totalitarianism in general.[2] In the conventional history of ideas, the organismic theory of the political body is said to entail the permanent inequality of members within the collective because the individual is seen as an abstraction that must be subordinated to its function within the larger whole qua living organism.[3] Moreover, these oppressive consequences are said to issue directly from the theory's intellectual origins in the German romantic movement understood as a mystical, irrationalist view of life that arose in ideological reaction to the Enlightenment. As Hans Kohn puts it, "the connection between nationalism and tradition received its strongest expression in German romanticism. . . . Starting as extreme individualists the German romanticists developed the opposite longing for a true, harmonious community, an organic folk community, which would immerse the individual in the unbroken chain of tradition. . . . To the optimistic idealization of the future, so characteristic of the Age of Enlightenment, the romanticists opposed a similar idealization of the national past."[4] Their ideal of the organic state "represented a flight from reality into mythology. It was not a return to any real past; it was an idyllic myth and poetic dream which transfigured the past into a Golden Age."[5]

One feature of Renan's definition of the nation is, however, not so easily reconciled with this received understanding of the organic community. For instead of defining organic bonds in terms of biological race or geographical

2. See, for instance, the representative claim in C. L. Wayper, *Political Thought* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 155, that "if through Bismarck and the triumph of an armed and organic nationalism, Hegel's influence can be seen leading to Nazism and Fascism, through Marx and Engels it can also be shown operating strongly on Lenin, Stalin, and Communist Russia."

3. See H. S. Reiss, "Introduction," in *The Political Thought of the German Romantics, 1793–1815,* ed. H. S. Reiss (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 8.

4. Hans Kohn, *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1955), p. 34. For an elaboration of the link between romanticism and the conception of the German nation as an organic community, see Hans Kohn, *Prelude to Nation-States: The French and German Experience, 1789–1815* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1967), chap. 24; and Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), chap. 4.

5. Kohn, *Prelude to Nation-States*, p. 172.

and ethnolinguistic descent, he suggests that the nation is first and foremost a moral project that involves rational willing and consensual acts of self-renunciation. "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle" ("WN," 19):

> Man is a slave neither of his race nor his language, nor of his religion, nor of the course of rivers nor of the direction taken by mountain chains. A large aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm of heart, creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation. So long as this moral consciousness gives proof of its strength by the sacrifices which demand the abdication of the individual to the advantage of the community, it is legitimate and has the right to exist. ("WN," 20)

The nation is spiritual because its life issues from purposive moral work in which individualistic interests are sacrificed so that the ideals of the community can be incarnated and given objective existence. This work binds together the nation qua organic whole.

Renan's definition of the nation is significant because it implies that the concept of "organism," from which the organismic metaphor of the social and political body is derived, is an important philosophical basis of nationalism. It is difficult to grasp the moral dimensions of the organismic metaphor today because both it and the nation-form are unfailingly read under the sinister sign of ideology and subjected to the profoundest caricature and misunderstanding. In fact, the metaphor was first formulated in German idealist philosophy before the advent of Jena Romanticism. It had a crucial role in Kant's and Fichte's moral and political philosophy because it was a response to the question of how freedom could be realized in the world of experience. The historical coincidence of the rise of European nationalism with the decline of the mechanistic metaphor of the state and the corresponding articulation of the organismic metaphor is part of the complex traffic between German idealism and nationalism, philosophy and politics. In the first half of this book, I examine the metaphor's origins in the German philosophy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in order to understand its inherent rationality and to reconstruct a more progressive genealogy for it and the nation-form from which it is indissociable. The organismic metaphor persists in the discourse of Third World revolutionary decolonizing nationalism. The second part of the

book assesses the metaphor's continuing feasibility and whether postcolonial nationalism has a future in our global conjuncture. It is important to stress from the outset that I am offering a critique of political organicism. I argue that the organismic metaphor is not plausible in contemporary globalization and that its apparent plausibility in the past masked an entire complex of unanswered questions concerning the transcendence of finitude that it promised. But instead of rehearsing tired arguments about the irrationalism of organic community, I proceed from an understanding of the rationality of organic life itself.

It is useful to begin with a brief consideration of the confusions riddling earlier critiques of organic community that follow from a resolute refusal to acknowledge the organismic metaphor's rational underpinnings. Written in the aftermath of National Socialism, many of these critiques remain extremely influential in contemporary discourse. They have perpetrated an intellectual-historical myth about the organic community that reduces the organismic metaphor to a manipulative mystification. These critiques can be divided into two main positions. They are not mutually exclusive and can be found in various combinations in a given thinker. The first position is a socioeconomic determinist argument that holds that German organic nationalism is the tendentious hallucination of a marginal intelligentsia who overcompensated for its political inactivity and economic backwardness in the realm of speculative thought. This was, of course, Marx's view. A harsher formulation holds that early German nationalism was a psychosocial pathology of a socially disgruntled *Bildungsburgertum* irresponsibly out of touch with political and economic reality. This lack of a reality principle led to disastrous historical consequences when others put their ideas into practice. In Hans Kohn's words, "the idealism of Fichte, of Hegel, the dreams of Novalis, the brilliant formulations of Schlegel and Adam Muller opened no doors to a responsible mastery of reality. They were, at their best, lofty excursions in the realm of thought . . . , but dangerous by reason of their claims to explain or change reality through their surrealistic concepts. Yet they exercised a disturbing and profound influence on politics and history in Germany and other lands where the cautious and

sober empiricism of a Locke or a Hume, the skeptical and rational clarity of a Descartes or a Voltaire, the critical analysis of a Kant, never took root.[6]

This type of argument invariably conflates German idealism with romanticism and views the organic community as a romantic product, which is denounced as mystical, fantastic, or irrational because it appeals to faith, imagination, and the passions. But this denunciation is not always convincing or unequivocal. Since the same idea is also found in the work of many idealist philosophers who were the architects of elaborate philosophical systems, it is also paradoxically characterized as *overly* rational to the point that it lacks realism.[7] The complex links and discontinuities between German idealism and romanticism, especially that of the Jena period, and an evaluation of romantic social and political thought are beyond the scope of this book.[8] But even if the romantic use of the organismic metaphor is mystical and may have led to an oppressive form of nationalism, this is not an inevitable consequence of the idea of organic community per se. Indeed, the charge that the idea of organic community is irrational is often based on a terminological confusion wherein a critique of the mechanical state based on the understanding (*Verstand*) is taken as a complete flight from reason without consideration of the philosophical

6. Kohn, *Prelude to Nation-States,* p. 124. Cf. H. S. Reiss, "Introduction," in *The Political Thought of the German Romantics,* who accuses Fichte of the same lack of realism (pp. 11, 21); and Greenfeld, *Nationalism,* pp. 309–10, 314, 325–26.

7. Kohn's views on the metaphor's irrationality are especially confused when he discusses Hegel. Having argued that the romantics saw the nation-state as "an organic personality, God's creation like the individual himself, only infinitely greater . . . and the fountainhead of all individual life," he notes that "though . . . Hegel . . . was not a romanticist but a rationalist, his concept of the state resembled that of the romanticists" (Kohn, *Nationalism,* 35). Kohn also overlooks that Kant, the philosopher of critical reason and liberal individualism, was the metaphor's originator.

8. For a detailed intellectual-historical reconstruction of the relationship between Jena romanticism and idealism, see Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). Hereafter cited in the text as *ERR*. For a philosophically nuanced argument that Jena romanticism is the transformation of the philosophy of spirit into an aesthetic philosophy, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism,* trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 34–35. One should distinguish the early romanticism of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and Schelling from the later romanticism of Adam Mueller.

distinction between the understanding and reason (*Vernunft*) in Kantian and post-Kantian thought.[9]

The second conventional critique points to the inner affinity between the organismic metaphor and German conservatism although it concedes that the metaphor has also been deployed in progressive and democratic political theories. It is argued that since an organism implies slow evolution and growth, the organismic metaphor is fundamentally conservative and, hence, has been more readily used by historicists, such as Gentz and Savigny, to justify conservative politics.[10] In his accounts of the organismic theory of the political body and German conservatism, Karl Mannheim combines both of the above arguments. He suggests that there is an elective affinity between political conservatism and the irrational mysticism of organismic thinking: "conservative thinking tends to favour theological-mystical, or, in any case, transcendental definitions" of state legitimation and mythical transcendence is easily given a historicist inflection.[11] However, he gives a sociological-determinist explanation for why German romanticism took on an irrational and mystical cast. Echoing Marx, he suggests that this hypertrophy of metaphysical abstraction is a reflection of and compensation for the political and economic underdevelopment of Germany, especially the political inefficacy of romantic intellectuals and their detachment from their bourgeois class origins.

Romanticism, Mannheim argues, is the first oppositional critique of the capitalist rationalization of the world. It "is . . . a reception, a collecting of

9. In order to argue that the organic spirit is the antithesis of reason, Liah Greenfeld creatively amends an English translation of Friedrich Schlegel's Athanaeum Fragment no. 366 ("Understanding [*Verstand*] is mechanical, wit is chemical, genius is organic spirit") by translating *Verstand* as "reason" (Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, 335, 543–44 n114).

10. See Reinhold Aris, *History of Political Thought in Germany from 1789 to 1815* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936), p. 294. Cf. Aira Kemiläinen, *Nationalism: Problems Concerning the Word, the Concept, and Classification,* Studia Historica Jyväskyläensia, vol. 3 (Jyväskylä, Finland: Kustantajat Publishers, 1964), p. 112.

11. Karl Mannheim, *Conservatism: A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge,* trans. David Kettler and Volker Meja (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 56; hereafter cited in the text as *C*. This text was Mannheim's 1925 *Habilitationschrift,* posthumously published in full in 1984. See also his "The History of the Concept of the State as an Organism: A Sociological Analysis," in *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953): 165–82, hereafter cited in the text as "Org."

all the [irrational] elements and ways of life, derived ultimately from the religious consciousness, which were pushed aside by the onmarch of capitalist rationalism" (*C,* 66). "It made it its task to salvage these elements, to lend them a new dignity and to save them from extinction. 'Community'-bound experience is pitted, in various forms, against manifestations of the turn to 'society' . . . : family against contract, intuitive certainty against rationality, inner experience as a source of knowledge against the mechanistic" (*C,* 65). But because these intellectuals are socially anomalous and politically inactive, their ideas were incorporated into the ideologies of more politically active social strata such as the feudal powers and landowners. They were also "without interest in the capitalist process or even threatened by it with extinction, and . . . were, moreover bound by tradition to the lost world forms [*Weltgestalten*] of the various stages of the pre-capitalist past," and they used romantic ideas as resources against bourgeois industrialism (*C,* 66). The strong affinity between mystical organismic ideas and conservatism thus obeys a strict sociological law governing German conditions.

Mannheim's critique of organismic theory is more incisive because he emphasizes that romanticism is not entirely irrational. "The romantic solution does not destroy the Enlightenment faith in reason, but merely modifies it. The faith in the power of reason, in the capacity of thought, is not abandoned. Only one type of thinking is rejected, the immobile thought of the Enlightenment with its deductions from single principles and mere combinations of rigid conceptual components, and the horizon of potential thinking is expanded only in contrast to this one type" (*C,* 142). This distinction between the static rationality of the Enlightenment and a more dynamic form of thought is precisely the distinction between the understanding's mechanical operations and reason's living procedures. But Mannheim's repeated identification of organismic thought with romantic mysticism prevents him from affirming the organismic metaphor's inherent rationality. He is clearly aware that Kant, who provided the first thorough philosophical elaboration of the idea of organism, "foreshadows the growth of the spirit of nationalism and the theory of the '*Volksgeist.*'" "The great builders of philosophical systems such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel could only free themselves from the spell of eighteenth century mechanism by starting with Kant's seemingly dry and abstract definitions" ("Org.," 172). Yet, in the same breath, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel are equated with "romantics like Adam Mueller" and criticized as examples of "a projection

of political experiences on to the metaphysical or aesthetic plane" (Ibid.).[12]

From Mannheim's criticism, we can see that critiques of organicism are concerned with the nature of the political itself. They repeatedly suggest that political experiences should be understood rationally and not mystically. But at the same time, one should also not be overly rational to the point that one loses touch with reality and becomes carried away, transported to metaphysical heights, thereby losing sight of practical exigencies. The political thus involves conformity to reality. But one could also argue the exact opposite, that it is the essence of the political to waver unceasingly between reality and ideals, between what is and what ought to be, in the endeavor to realize the ideal and to idealize reality. This is what distinguishes it from a mere pragmatics or technics. It is a practice with a critical-normative dimension. It is precisely the problem of reality that is at stake in a moral politics or political morality, the problem of how norms can be actualized and how reality can be transformed in the image of normative ideals through critical practice. As Frederick Beiser aptly notes, the myth of the apolitical German intellectual who escapes from the harsh world of political reality into an ideal world of metaphysics and aesthetics "has blinded scholars to the political motivations of so much German philosophy and literature in the eighteenth century. . . . [The ideas of Kant, Fichte, et al.] were not harmless abstractions floating in Plato's world of forms, but potent weapons engaged in political struggle" (*ERR*, 8).[13]

But a definition of the political as the site of the critique of reality and the incarnation of ideals would involve "metaphysics" if by that we mean a dimension that is beyond brute facticity and finite existence, a state of being higher than a merely given reality. As we will see in subsequent chapters, when idealist philosophers like Kant, Fichte, and Hegel speak of moral freedom as the basis of political freedom, they have in mind this higher state where we transcend our finitude through the causality of ideas. It is moreover not accidental that critiques of the mystical nature of idealist moral and political philosophy always focus on the organismic metaphor

12. This theme of "yes, philosopher X is a rationalist, but still too metaphysical" is repeated in Mannheim's reading of Hegel as a dynamic rationalist. See *C,* esp. 154–55. Hegel would pose problems for Mannheim's characterization of organismic thought as an irrational mysticism, but his unfinished text breaks off before a full analysis of Hegel.

13. Beiser suggests that the myth originates from Madame de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*.

of the social and political body. For the idea of organic life was formulated in idealist philosophy precisely to capture a form of being in which reality and ideality, matter and rational-purposive form, can coexist.

The main purpose of this critical exposition of the dominant intellectual-historical myth of organic community is to suggest that organismic conceptions of collectivity do not necessarily repudiate normative reason. The idea of organic life represents a rupture from rigidly mechanistic conceptions of the world, and different conceptualizations of the organism give rise to different uses of the organismic metaphor in moral and political philosophy. To take an obvious instance, while Mannheim and others seem to understand organic life in preformationist terms, that is, as a static form of evolution in which the past is a germinal essence from which the present and future unfolds, most idealist philosophers were influenced by Blumenbach's theory of epigenesis and saw organic life as a dynamic process of self-formation and self-generation, a spontaneous, rational-purposive and autocausal becoming.[14] This dynamic understanding of organic life informs Marxism and the discourse of revolutionary decolonization, where the organic is seen as a rational response to capitalist rationalization under the sign of colonialism.

THE TRANSITION FROM MECHANISTIC TO ORGANISMIC METAPHORS OF THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BODY

But what motivated the change from the dominant eighteenth-century understanding of collective existence in mechanical terms to seeing society and the political body as an organism? And what exactly did "organism" as the antonym of "machine" mean? Friedrich Meinecke's account of the rise of German nationalism between 1795 and 1815 is a useful starting point:

> Modern man now entered the political organism with the intent of conquering it. It was nothing new for men with modern attitudes to occupy positions of central authority; they were in evidence from the days of Emperor Frederick II in the Middle Ages to the Frederican age. But on the whole they had driven

14. For Mannheim's preformationist understanding of organismic thought, see *C*, pp. 95–102.

> the state from the outside, as it were; guiding it as one would a machine. The reformers, on the contrary, wanted to possess the state, and infuse it with their blood.[15]

In the intervening years between the French Revolution and the formation of the German Confederation after Napoleon's decline, Napoleon had invaded Germany, dissolved the Holy Roman Empire, and subjugated various territorial states including Prussia. This is the historical catalyst of the political reform of the absolutist state and German nationalism. What is striking is Meinecke's analogy between the absolutist state and a machine and how he distinguishes the machine-state's organization from that of a warm-blooded living being. A machine is organized from the top down, by an external force. In contradistinction, a living being is organized from within and self-perpetuating. The reform of the absolutist state, figured as the transformation of a machine into a living creature, involves imparting it with the capacity of self-organization, or organic life. By the end of the quoted passage, the meaning of "organism" in the metaphor of the state as political organism has mutated from "technical instrument" to its complete opposite: a nonartificial life-form.

The discursive allusions and references signalling this paradigm change or rupture are necessarily diacritical and operate in two registers. First, in the philosophy of nature, which is not yet clearly divorced from the natural sciences, the study of living forms as phenomena that cannot be explained by efficient or mechanical causality represents a clear "shifting of scenes" that sets new limits on the field and transforms its legitimate areas of inquiry. For the victory of the emergent epigenetic concept of life over preformationist theories meant that divine creation could no longer be a legitimate issue in the scientific study of the natural world.[16] At the same time, the new idea of organism stimulated an equally revolutionary epistemic shift in political philosophy: the repudiation of the mechanistic model of the state that had been dominant since Hobbes.[17] The rationalistic aspect of

15. Friedrich Meinecke, *The Age of German Liberation, 1795–1815,* trans. Peter Paret and Helmuth Fischer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 45.

16. See Nicholas Jardine, *The Scenes of Inquiry: On the Reality of Questions in the Sciences* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p. 53.

the organismic metaphor of the political body often goes unrecognized simply because most contemporary political theorists are unaware of debates about organic life in the history and philosophy of the life sciences. Let us first consider the shift in political philosophy.

The use of the organism as an extended metaphor for the political body was first explicitly formulated by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790, 2d ed. 1793). Prior to this, the political body was predominantly imagined in terms of mechanistic models of state and society that had succeeded the hylozoistic Aristotelian-Galenic tradition. In his formulation of the state as "an artificial man," Hobbes had been the first to characterize the political body within the mechanistic framework of Descartes's description of the human body qua complex animal body as an automaton.[18] For Hobbes, the artificial life of automata are imitations by human art of the animal life created by a divine Artificer.[19] The absolutist state or commonwealth is produced when human art undertakes the even more ambitious attempt of imitating *human* life itself with its superior trait of reason. It is in this sense that Leviathan is an artifical man.[20]

On the one hand, Hobbes's metaphor of the state as a human machine significantly modifies the classical analogy of the body politic, which is

17. For more detailed reconstructions of this intellectual-historical shift that also touch on the adventures of mechanistic and organismic metaphors of the political body from ancient Greek philosophy to the contemporary era, see Ahlrich Meyer, "Mechanische und organische Metaphorik politischer Philosophie," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 13, no. 2 (1969): 128–99; Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, "Organ, Organismus, Organisation, politischer Körper," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland,* ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhardt Koselleck (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1978) 4:519–622; the entries on *Organ, organik, Organisation, Organismus,* and *Organizismus* in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie,* ed. Joachim Ritter, vol. 6 (Basel: Schwabe, 1984): 1317–61; Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott: Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), chap. 6; F. W. Coker, *Organismic Theories of the State: Nineteenth Century Interpretations of the State as Organism or as Person* (New York: AMS Press, 1967); and C. L. Wayper, *Political Thought.*

18. For Descartes's comparison of animate bodies to clocks and hydraulically operated automata, see *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences,* part 5, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes,* trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1:139–41; and "Treatise on Man," ibid., 1:99.

19. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1981), p. 81.

20. Ibid., pp. 81–82.

fused with ideas of covenant and contract theory. Hobbes's commonwealth is not the well-integrated and harmonious living unity of the Greek body politic, since it has to be regulated by the force of law. On the other hand, Hobbes still retains the Aristotelian understanding of the relationship between members of the state and the sovereign: Leviathan's members are likened to the different functional parts or limbs of the individual human body as organs or instruments of the soul qua source of life and movement, even if these body parts have to be made to cooperate through the mediating agency of joints (the executive and judicial powers) and nerves (coercion and reward). One glimpses here three fundamental motifs in Hobbes's metaphor from which the more concrete features of the mechanistic model of the political body are derived. In the first place, the state is characterized by *hierarchy* since its relation to its members is said to correspond to the vertical relationship of subordination between an alien soul and bodily parts. Second, the commonwealth is *artificial* since the harmony of the political body is not given, but established by the device of a social contract and continually maintained by enlightened despotism. But finally and most importantly, because these political bonds replicate the soul–limbs relationship found in nature, artifice is itself a mimesis of nature. The mechanistic model of the state is thus premised upon *the absence of a sharp distinction between the artificial and the naturally living*.

The mechanical state's characteristics can be understood as elaborations of these underlying motifs, which function as lenses to apprehend and give cognizable shape to sociopolitical relations and even as a means of justification. For instance, the absolutist state's hierarchical nature is understood and justified by recourse to the idea that the sovereign and its various powers articulate the common good because it is the external agent that sets the sociopolitical machine into motion. The account of the emergence of society and state from a contract between atomistic individuals who associate in order to pursue self-interest is understood in terms of the separate components in a mechanical assemblage that are only put together for a specific purpose, and the coercive force used to maintain the association is understood in terms of the physical forces that hold a machine together. Finally, the mimetic relationship between the rational designs of political art and those of divine artifice in the creation of humanity and nature can serve as a more rational basis for the sovereign's divine right.

Of course, there were vitalist conceptions of society and the political body pre-dating the organismic model of German idealism that challenged the absolutist implications of the mechanistic model, especially in the discourses immediately preceding and during the French revolution. But generally speaking, despite their egalitarian and progressive implications, these—unlike those of the second generation French Romantics such as Renan and Michelet—remained within the mechanistic paradigm for at least three reasons. First, as Hegel pointed out, social-contract theory was mechanistic since it presupposed that society and state were artifacts brought into being by an act of association which must, by definition, be prior and external to the collectivity that was formed. But more significantly, although the living people were opposed to the machine-state, the body politic's life process was still conceived under principles of mechanical causality because its source of movement was attributed to something qualitatively and substantively alien to the body parts—namely, a soul. The important point here is not whether the corporate will is autocratic or formed through rational consensus: its mechanistic nature necessarily follows from the idea that it is different from and superior to the individual wills from which it is composed because it is thereby conferred the same intelligible principle of animation ascribed to the soul.[21] In contradistinction, in a genuinely organismic conception of the political body, the relationship between whole and parts can no longer be understood in terms of the soul–limbs relationship because the parts are both cause and effect of the whole and not subordinate to it. Finally, to the extent that the totality of nature was conceived as the creation of a divine artificer, no genuine idea of organism and, hence, no genuinely organismic conception of collective existence was possible. In the original instance, nature itself is not self-creating but a product of something else!

Rousseau's writings best exemplify the awkwardness of a vitalism that has not completely freed itself from mechanism. In his description of the

21. In *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers État?,* Abbé Sieyès famously defines the nobility as "a people apart, a false people which, unable to exist by itself for lack of useful organs, latches on to a real nation like those vegetable growths which can only live on the sap of the plants they exhaust and suck dry" (quoted in Greenfeld, *Nationalism,* p. 172). The model of the body politic is clearly that of a giant human body, a supreme cause that is more powerful than its parts, on which a parasite is attached.

body politic as "a moral and collective body" or "public person" with a general will formed by a social contract between private persons with particular wills, Rousseau rejects Hobbes's absolutist model.[22] Insofar as each individual member is in unity with other members and forms "an indivisible part of the whole," Rousseau's idea of the general will is partially organismic. Indeed, in the earlier *Discourse on Political Economy* (1755–56), he explicitly compares the body politic to a living organic body where the parts are united in such a way that there is reciprocal connection and internal correspondence. The source of life is the interdependence of the parts:

> The body politic, taken by itself, can be looked upon as an organized body, alive and similar to a man's. The sovereign power represents the head; the laws and customs are the brain, . . . public finances are the blood which a wise economy, performing the functions of the heart, sends out to distribute nourishment and life throughout the entire body.
>
> The life of the one as well as the other is the self common to the whole, the reciprocal sensitivity and the internal correspondence of all the parts. What if this communication should cease, the formal unity vanish, and the contiguous parts no longer belong together except by being next to one another? The man is dead, or the state is dissolved.
>
> The body politic is, then, also a moral being that has a will, and this general will . . . always tends towards the preservation and the well-being of the whole and of each part.[23]

Yet, in *The Social Contract,* the body politic is explicitly described as "an artificial body."[24] Indeed, Rousseau also understands the organic body itself in mechanistic terms. In the same passage from the *Discourse on Political Economy,* he notes that "the citizens are the body and the members that make the machine move, live, and work."[25] Hence, regardless of whether

22. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract,* book 1, chap. 6 [9–10], in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings,* ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 50.

23. Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy,* in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings,* p. 6.

24. Book 3, chap. 1 [21], p. 86. Cf. book 3, chap. 11 [2], p. 109.

25. Cf. *Of the Social Contract,* book 3, chap. 11 [3], p. 109, where the heart as the source of life is described in the mechanical-functional terms of a hydraulic pump.

he characterizes the body politic as natural or artificial, as a natural telos of human freedom or as an artificial mechanism of contract, Rousseau continues to conceive of the living human body metaphorically as a mechanical assemblage of internal organs and limbs governed by the mind.[26]

In its inaugural formulations, the organismic metaphor of society and state in German philosophy is a polemical response to the mechanistic model outlined above. There were, of course, sociohistorical conditions for its emergence: for instance, the suitability of the organismic metaphor for expressing the strong desires for active political participation and political unity and for greater identification of individuals with the state felt by the growing bourgeois stratum in the transition from an autocratic, administrative mercantilist state to a modern capitalist state.[27] What interests us is the metaphor's ideational structure and the philosophical work it was designed to accomplish. In the hands of the Jena romantics with whom it is most frequently associated, the organismic metaphor was used to articulate a new concept of society that was opposed not only to the mechanical model of enlightened despotism, but also to the modern civil society celebrated by theories of social contract and liberal individualism.[28] *The Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism,* an anonymous manuscript in Hegel's handwriting, denounced the state as inimical to freedom because it was nothing other than a machine and championed its abolition: "We must therefore go beyond the state! For every state must treat free human beings as if they were cogs in a machine; but that it should not do; therefore it should *cease* to exist."[29] Novalis spoke of transforming the state-machine "into a living autonomous creature," "a poetic state" in which "the unruliness of nature and the forced order of artifice would interpenetrate one another

26. For more detailed discussions of the tension between organismic and mechanistic conceptions in Rousseau's account of the political body, see, for instance, Ahlrich Meyer, "Mechanische und organische Metaphorik politischer Philosophie," pp. 142–47; and C. L. Wayper, *Political Thought,* p. 151.

27. See Aris, *History of Political Thought in Germany from 1789 to 1815,* pp. 292–93.

28. For a fair-minded and thorough assessment of early romantic political theory, see Beiser, *ERR,* esp. ch. 9.

29. Anon., *The Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism* (1796–1797), in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics,* ed. and trans. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 4. Available in German in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus,* in *Werke I: Frühe Schriften,* ed. Eva Moldernhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 234–35.

and be resolved into *spirit.*"[30] The mechanical state of enlightened despotism is based on self-interest. It is a state "where the interests of the state were as self-centred as those of its subjects, yet where the interests of both are so artificially connected that they reciprocally promoted one another."[31] In contradistinction, Novalis's poetic state is an organized society bound together by the living ties of reason and not the artifice of self-interested calculative understanding: "The drive toward society is the drive toward *organization*. Through this s*piritual assimilation* there often arises from the most common ingredients a good society centred around one spiritual individual."[32] This spiritual state is *an organism,* a form of life higher than mere existence. Likewise, speaking of life as an approximation of the concept of freedom, Friedrich Schlegel points to the importance of a harmonious relation of the individual to the whole: "we cannot consider human beings individually. The question of the vocation of man concerns, therefore, not the individual but the whole of humanity. We have constructed it as *an organic concept.* Practical philosophy should not construct therefore the ideal of an individual person, but the idea of the whole, of society."[33]

The common theme in all these examples is the link between spirit as a concrete form of reason, freedom, self-perpetuating life, and the harmonious unity of individuals in a society that preserves their autonomy. As opposed to both the paternalistic state-machine and artificial modern bourgeois civil society, such a society is a rationally organized totality, or living organic whole, wherein freedom is concretely approximated or even realized. The early conception of the organismic model of society thus overturns the key motifs of the mechanistic model. First, the hierarchical relationship of the different limbs of the individual human body to the soul or mind is replaced by a complete interdependence of parts and whole. Instead of receiving its movement from an alien source, the collectivity is self-animating. Instead of being subordinated to the government, each individual actively

30. Novalis, *Mixed Remarks,* no. 122, in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics,* p. 84, emphasis added.

31. Novalis, *Faith and Love* (1798), no. 36, in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, p. 45.

32. Novalis, *Pollen* (1798), no. 59, in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics,* p. 19, emphasis added.

33. *Philosophical Lectures: Transcendental Philosophy* (Jena, 1800–1801), part 2, excerpted in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics,* p. 156, emphasis added.

participates in the collective's life just as the parts and whole of an organism mutually determine each other. Second, society is not formed by a contract for the pursuit of individual self-interest. It is instead a harmonious whole in which individual self-fulfillment and self-development are fostered through social interaction and cooperation. The community is therefore held together not by external force and coercion, but by bonds with the permanence of a higher nature, the rational bonds of spirit and all its products: art, philosophy, and, more generally, culture. Culture is not necessarily territorially bound, although for many romantic thinkers it took the form of the culture of a nation or a people. Finally, such a society is not merely an imitation of nature, but a higher form of life. As a self-originating being, its ends, its structure or form, and its development are internally prescribed and inseparable from its parts. In this respect, it transcends mere nature conceived as mechanism. Thus, for the first time in philosophical history, "organism" sharply breaks with artifice and derivation.

One sees here how mistaken the caricature of Jena romanticism as the purveyor of the theory of the organic state actually is. As Frederick Beiser points out, Schlegel, Novalis, and Schleiermacher, who articulated their ideal of organic community in the late 1790s at the height of their individualistic period, did not have a proto-Nazi organic theory of the state, but a rationalist organic theory of society in which the autonomy and unique self-development of the individual was actively cultivated (*ERR,* 226–27). Indeed, *The Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism* exemplifies the strong anarchistic streak in the early romantics who thought that the state would wither away because it is unnecessary to an ideal organic society. Although later German romantics like Adam Mueller developed the organismic metaphor into a conservative theory of the state, unless we are blinded by anachronism it is clear that "what the organic concept meant to Mueller in 1808 was not what it meant to Friedrich Schlegel, Schleiermacher, and Novalis in 1798" (*ERR,* 238).

I have outlined some of the key differences between organismic and mechanistic metaphors of society and the political body. But we have yet to grasp exactly why the rational ideals of political morality find their most apposite expression in the organismic metaphor. Why was it important to characterize society and the political body as an organism? This implies a series of other questions: for instance, why is mechanism inimical to the rational ideal of freedom? What is an organism and in what manner of

speaking is reason isomorphic with organic vitality? How are reason and organic life connected to freedom? The significance of the organismic metaphor can only be properly understood if we see it as a braiding-together of three fundamental philosophemes that emerged in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century philosophy: a transcendental idea of freedom, the concept of culture, and the idea of organism. As we will see, we are very far from having renounced organicism in contemporary political discourse.

FREEDOM, CULTURE, AND ORGANISM

The idea of freedom as a special power (*Vermögen*) of causality, a capacity for willing and acting, doing and making, through which rational beings could transcend the finitude or contingency of their natural existence, is obviously not original to German idealism. What was new was the broaching of freedom's possibility without reference to divine providence. The canonical formulation of this transcendental idea of freedom, which Fichte, Hegel and others develop and modify, belongs to Kant:

> By freedom in the cosmological sense . . . I understand the faculty [*Vermögen*] of beginning a state from itself, the causality of which does not in turn stand under another cause determining it in time in accordance with the law of nature.[34]

But this auto-causality contradicts causality according to natural laws, whereby every occurrence must have a cause that must in turn have a prior cause. Hence, Kant adds that freedom can only be comprehended when "reason creates the idea of a *spontaneity,* which could start to act from itself, without needing to be preceded by any other cause that in turn determines it to action in accordance to the law of causal connection" (*KrV,* A 533/B 561; p. 533, emphasis added).

In the entire post-Kantian idealist tradition, moral and political freedom are derived from and grounded on transcendental freedom. This is why

34. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*), A 533/B 561; p. 533. Hereafter cited in the text as *KrV*.

mechanism is inimical to freedom. The laws of causality governing nature defined as the totality of appearances dictate that each thing or event must have a prior cause within the linear succession of time. Such laws are characterized as mechanical in analogy with the fundamentally dependent nature of a machine. The sensible natural world is a mechanism in two senses: the movement of its different parts exhibits a blind necessity or predetermined regularity that can be expressed through mathematical formulae. More importantly, no part of nature is self-sufficient because no occurrence or movement is possible that is not caused by something else, just as no automaton can operate without being first set in motion by something other, and no moving machine can work without being connected to an external source from which it takes its energy.

The spontaneous self-causality of freedom is thus antithetical to mechanical causality. Without this auto-causality, no moral autonomy is possible because "freedom in the practical sense is the *independence* of the power of choice [*Willkür] from necessitation* by impulses of sensibility" (*KrV,* A 534/B 562; p. 533, emphasis added). If our actions are determined by sensuous impulses, we are no better than machines because such impulses are part of the blind necessity of nature. In contradistinction, the moral will belongs to a self-determining being, an autonomous subject whose actions are determined by its own universal reason and not an external source. Such a practical being would be self-originating and an end-in-itself because it would contain the ground of its own existence within itself, a ground which moreover possesses universal validity or rational necessity. Because the moral will exhibits a spontaneous auto-causality similar to transcendental freedom, "the abolition [*Aufhebung*] of transcendental freedom would also simultaneously eliminate all practical freedom" (*KrV,* A 534/B 562; p. 534).

In the First and Second Critiques, what Kant juxtaposes to mechanism is freedom, and not organism. However, because the causality of freedom lies beyond spatiotemporal conditions, it is "outside" the sensible world of experience. Hence, the idea of transcendental freedom logically leads to the problem of how this auto-causality can be manifested or have effects in the empirical world. How can freedom operate in the world of appearances in which we live? Since practical freedom is linked to the causality of reason, what is broached here is precisely the ability of reason to incarnate

or realize its ideals. Phrased in this way, the problem has implications that extend beyond the corpus of German idealist political thought. As I have noted, any normative theory of the political must be concerned with the question of how rational ideals can be made real. Albrecht Wellmer similarly observes that "the question how freedom can be realized in the modern world has inspired and haunted European political philosophy for centuries. This is true at least if we only regard those political thinkers who belong to the tradition of the Enlightenment in the broadest sense of the word . . . [such as] Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Mill, Tocqueville, and, in our day, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and John Rawls."[35] The modern conception of freedom implies something more than a rigid neo-Platonic distinction between the existing world and an ideal condition. Insofar as freedom must be regarded as an ideal that is capable of being realized, the distinction between the ideal and the real can and must be crossed. Conversely, one must regard the existing world as something that can be transformed in accordance with a rational and universal image.

The idealist formulation of transcendental freedom merely brings out in the profoundest relief the central paradox of the modern conception of freedom. In intellectual-historical terms, this understanding of freedom arose in the wake of the separation of mechanism from human reason effected by the Newtonian/Cartesian predication of the natural or material world as the totality of objects governed by arational mechanical laws. For humanity to be free from the constraints and dictates of natural necessity, the world of mechanism must first be sundered from the sphere of human reason, to the point that they are regarded as two ontologically distinct realms. Henceforth, freedom is precisely what is not or cannot be blindly determined or given by something else: for example, past events that are part of the mechanism of nature. Freedom is, first and foremost, freedom from the given. This sundering of the realm of human freedom from the material world of mechanism is part of the larger shift from a cosmological to an anthropologistic worldview. As opposed to a natural-teleological conception of the cosmos, a mechanistic conception of the world shifts the burden of responsibility for the current state of social and political existence

35. Albrecht Wellmer, "Models of Freedom in the Modern World," *Philosophical Forum* 21 (1989–90): 227.

from an inscrutable divinity to finite humanity. Modern freedom is self-grounding. Its paradoxical crisis, however, is that in order to be realized, the sphere of freedom must somehow be reconciled with or conjoined to the arational world of mechanism from which it was constitutively sundered.

The modern philosophemes of culture and organism that emerged at around the same time became invaluable for articulating a response to the problem of freedom's actualization. Both concepts shared a striking conjunctural affinity: they were formulated in reaction to the impact of industrial modernity and were therefore opposed to mechanism in a more concrete sense. It has been argued that the theory of mechanism is a symptom of the industrial age and reflects its various features: the use of simpler kinds of machines such as the automaton and the clock in early industrial life; the nascent capitalist economy and the individualistic norms of its rising bourgeois class; and the subsequent specialization and division of labor required by the expansion of manufacture that led to the dismemberment of a product into its component parts.[36] Similarly, the harmonious unity of parts and whole in the modern idea of organism can be seen as the displaced figuration of a desired solution to the vicissitudes of industrial society—the decline of communal spirit as a result of the atomistic pursuit of selfish interests and socioeconomic division.

The concept of culture was also a response to the shock of modernity. The philosophy of culture sought to correct the mechanistic understanding of the world and the entropy of civil society, which were factors contributing to the accelerated erosion of time-honored traditions and customs that had held society together. According to a well-known narrative about modernity, "an instrumental-pragmatic conception of knowledge as power, as a tool of mastery . . . destroyed the traditional conception of nature as meaningful cosmos or divine creation," and as the repository of natural laws that provided commonly accepted guiding norms for human conduct.[37] Consequently, the concept of culture, as György Márkus points out, was invented "in order to make up this norm- and value-deficit."[38] More concretely, the institutions, skills, and spiritual powers of culture were seen as a shelter

36. See Karl Mannheim, "Org.," p. 169.

37. György Márkus, "Antinomien der Kultur. Das Projekt der Moderne zwischen Aufklärung und Romantik," *Lettre International* (Berlin), no. 38 (1997): 13.

38. Ibid.

from and antidote to the vaporizing forces of industrial capitalist civil society. Although the division of labor was crucial for technical and social progress and, hence, important for the advancement of the outer aspects of culture such as urbanity, civility, and the autonomization of the cultural sphere itself, the occupational specialization of individuals in civil society and the ensuing division of society into socioeconomic classes with special functions had stunted human development and fragmented and separated the powers of the human personality. The human vocation for freedom had been degraded with this dismemberment of humanity's social character. If social regulation was left solely to the modern centralized state or the self-regulating market, the result would be "civilized barbarism," the glittering misery Rousseau excoriated in the First and Second Discourses.[39] Thus, the intense preoccupation with *Bildung* in the late eighteenth century by thinkers such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, Fichte, Schiller, and Goethe was an attempt to remedy this etiolation of humanity without lapsing into a Rousseauistic idealization of the state of nature.[40]

The concepts of culture and organism thereby became interconnected, most notably in the use of "*Bildung*" to refer to processes of human cultivation as well as organic forms. This locution was popularized by Goethe, and the two concepts were used to elucidate each other.[41] Alloyed to the more abstract antimechanism of the transcendental idea of freedom, these concepts formed the basis for the organismic metaphor of the social and political body. One must also note here a special conjunctural affinity to nationalism, which was also a response to the deep crisis and upheaval of modernity and a search for regeneration and stronger social foundations. Consequently, the nation-form was most readily characterized as an organic community although the organismic metaphor was also used to describe other sociopolitical forms. But what is the deeper philosophical

39. The phrase "civilized barbarism" is from Agnes Heller, "Culture, or Invitation to Luncheon with Immanuel Kant," in *A Philosophy of History in Fragments* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 137.

40. See Roy Pascal, "'Bildung' and the Division of Labour," in *German Studies Presented to Walter Horace Bruford* (London: George Harrap, 1962), pp. 14–28.

41. Goethe repeatedly drew parallels between works of art and organic forms—for instance, in his suggestion, "*Die höchste und einzige Operation in der Natur und Kunst ist die Gestaltung*." "*Gestaltung*" is a cognate of "*Bildung*." For a detailed discussion, see Elizabeth M. Wilkinson, "Goethe's Conception of Form," *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1951): 175–97. The quotation from Goethe's correspondence is cited on p. 190 of Wilkinson's essay.

affinity between the ideas of culture and organism and the auto-causality of modern freedom?

The problematic of culture is expressed through a series of cognate terms that include most notably, "*Kultur,*" "*Bildung,*" "*Aufklärung,*" "*Erziehung,*" and "*Geist*." As late as 1784, Moses Mendelssohn wrote that

> the words "enlightenment [*Aufklärung*]," "culture [*Kultur*]" and "education [*Bildung*]" are still newcomers to our language. At the present time they belong merely to the language of books. The common masses scarcely understand them. . . . Linguistic usage, meanwhile, appears to want to make a distinction among these words which have similar meanings, but it has not yet had time to establish their borders. Education, culture and enlightenment are modifications of social life, effects of the hard work and efforts of human beings to improve their social condition.[42]

The philosopheme of culture articulates the formative power over nature that co-belongs with humanity, not only as an animal capable of rational contemplation, but as a purposive being with the ability to shape its natural self and external conditions in the image of rationally prescribed forms.[43] Mendelssohn points to its two crucial moments: culture as the individual-pedagogical process of cultivation and its objective results.

The first aspect and basic meaning of culture was formed through a metaphorical extension of cultivation as agrarian activity (the Latin

---

42. Moses Mendelssohn, "On the Question: What Does 'to Enlighten' Mean?" in *Philosophical Writings,* ed. and trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 313.

43. The following discussion draws heavily on the work of the Budapest School philosopher, György Márkus. See Márkus, "Culture: The Making and the Make-Up of a Concept (An Essay in Historical Semantics)," *Dialectical Anthropology* 18 (1993): 3–29 (hereafter cited in the text as "Culture"), and "A Society of Culture: the Constitution of Modernity," in *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity,* ed. Gillian Robinson and John Rundell (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 15–29 (hereafter cited in the text as "SC"). See also Rudolf Vierhaus, "Bildung," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* 1 (1972); Jörg Fisch, "Zivilization, Kultur," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* 7 (1992); W. H. Bruford, *Culture and Society in Classical Weimar, 1775–1806* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), esp. appendix 2, pp. 432–40; and Raymond Guess, "*Kultur, Bildung, Geist,*" in *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 29–50. The ethical and social dimension that follows from the idea of tending and improving by education or training is rarely found in English formulations of the culture concept before Matthew Arnold.

cultura) into the educational task of the ethical and intellectual development of the mind or the soul. Cicero's idea of "*cultura animi*" is the most notable formulation of this. Thus, "*Bildung*" is often linked to "*Erziehung*" and used to refer to processes of training, development, education, and formation.[44] But "*Bildung*" also refers to the results and products of cultivation. This was already implied by the term's religious roots in German mystical discourse from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Pietism. The process of spiritual forming (*bilden*) involved the remaking or transforming of the soul into the picture or image (*Bild*) of God through individual activity.[45] Because *Bildung* involved the creation of an object corresponding to an ideal model, it always contained an objective moment. When the term was secularized in the Enlightenment and used as a synonym of "*Kultur,*" "*Bildung*" designated the inner-directed formation of an individual in the image of a personality prescribed by moral norms. Its product was, in the first instance, the resultant state of mind or the way of existence of the cultivated moral person. But the incarnational dimension of "*Bildung*" with its self-reflexive causality that belonged to a spiritual or metaphysical plane was gradually extended to objects in the external world such that one could speak of a "world of *Bildung*." This realm of spiritual works was deemed to play a fundamental role in the education of humanity to full maturity and the furthering of universal progress because its contents evoked and stimulated a similar spiritual activity in the minds of other perceivers. Hence, in the 1770s and 1780s, culture "became the synonym for all those *objectified results* of human creativity by, and due to which the "natural constitution" of human individuals—their inborn needs, drives and propensities—

44. "*Erziehung*" refers more narrowly to the process of education and training that is imposed by a person or group on another and implies socialization, whereas "*Bildung*" can also be used to refer to a process of self-formation, the form ("*Bild*") that is imparted in such a process, and the results of self-cultivation. Different authors used the terms differently. Kant uses "*Kultur*" to refer to the vocational development of the full powers of each individual. Fichte rarely used "*Kultur,*" speaking instead of various forms of education using "*Bildung*" and "*Erziehung.*" For Hegel, the process of *Bildung* and its various products such as the arts, philosophy, and social institutions were all manifestations of *Geist. Kultur* and *Bildung* remained synonyms until the second half of the nineteenth century, when *Bildung* was restricted to the educational process and its results. See Geuss, "*Kultur, Bildung, Geist,*" pp. 32–33, 36–37.

45. See Márkus, "Culture," p. 15.

become modified, developed and supplemented" ("Culture," 18; emphasis in original).

Culture is a crucial agent for the realization of freedom because of its incarnational causality. Its individual-pedagogic dimension already involves an internal link between autonomous rational effort and the shaping of some naturally given ground into cultivated form. This ability to transform and improve *human* nature through rational endeavor, which cannot be understood solely in terms of mechanical causality, implies that humanity possesses a degree of freedom from nature. In *Bildung,* the ideal form is not separate from the process and resulting product in the same way a model is separate from its copy. A model is temporally prior and external to the copy, which is a reproduction or duplication of the original by mechanical means. In *Bildung,* however, the form is simultaneously a dynamic forming. *Bildung* is a rational inner-directed process we undertake or submit to precisely because it brings out and develops natural dispositions or capacities (*Naturanlagen*) already in us. Thus, although it has regulative and normative functions, the ideal form to be stamped on us also inheres in and is inseparable from the material and process of production. Heidegger captures *Bildung*'s peculiar temporality in his observation that

> *Bildung* means two things. On the one hand, *Bildung* is a *Bilden* [forming/stamping] in the sense of an unfolding stamping [*ein Bilden im Sinne der entfaltende Prägung*]. This *Bilden,* however, *bildet* [stamps or impresses; "*Bilden*" *aber "bildet" (prägt)*] by antecedently taking measure in terms of a paradigmatic image [*maßgebenden Anblick;* literally, a glimpse that gives measure], which for that reason is called the proto-type [*Vor-bild;* literally, pre-image]. *Bildung* is at once stamping and guidance by an image [*Prägung zumal und Geleit durch ein Bild*].[46]

Bildung is the stamping of something, the giving of form to what is formless but only insofar as the form conforms to something within the thing to be formed. Yet, this "inner something" must be brought out or developed by

46. Martin Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit* (Bern: Francke, 1947), p. 24. I have benefited from discussing the passage with Peter Fenves who helped me with my translation. Heidegger's criticism of *Bildung* is directed at the concept's Platonic origins.

the process of formation which is an unfolding or guiding through an image or picture. Although Heidegger is primarily interested in the ontological underpinnings of *Bildung* rather than its development into the anthropologistic theme of human cultivation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, his comments help us understand the peculiar nature of *Bildung*'s causality, where the ideal form's inseparability from the process of its materialization is a spontaneity that cannot be captured by linear mechanical causality. Thus, although *Bildung* takes place in the sensible world, it is also a process of auto-causality through reason. As we will see, because the inherent dispositions *Bildung* brings out are not preformed instincts or innate knowledge, it can only be explained in terms of an organism's spontaneous auto-causality.

When *Bildung* is extended to designate the realm where ideal forms materialize as external objects with a reality or life independent of the contingent circumstances of their creation, this world of objectified mind or spiritual being ("*geistige Sein*") is seen as exhibiting the same spontaneous auto-causality. Because they are stamped or imprinted by spiritual and rational activity, these objects are dematerialized or idealized. Consequently, they become portals admitting an individual subject into the world of *Bildung*. When they stimulate or revive a similar spiritual or formative activity in the minds of their perceivers, they do so not as external objects, but as an integral part of an eternally ongoing process of spiritualization and formation. Hence, culture is regarded as the process and realm of the transcendence of finitude in at least two senses. More obviously, it is the inheritable works and accomplishments of earlier generations that endure beyond the finite life span of mortal individuals and can therefore preserve for posterity humanity's significant achievements with the hope of resurrecting these ideals in succeeding generations. But more importantly, these inherited works can reinspirit us because they are objectifications of universally valid norms. Because these norms are not just blindly given by tradition but need to be rationally justified through changing conditions of existence, they can be used to guide us in our self-determined activity of remaking ourselves and the world. Thus, Ernst Cassirer speaks of cultural symbolic activity as the process by which we transcend the finite world: "Human culture taken as whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases of this process. In all of them man discovers and

proves a new power—the power to build up a world of his own, an 'ideal' world."[47]

Consequently, culture in its utopian face is often described as an objective reality that is superior to nature—or the realm where humanity overcomes nature through reason. For Kant, cultural progress will undermine the state of nature "until art [*Kunst*], when it reaches perfection, once more becomes nature—and this is the ultimate goal [*letzte Ziel*] of man's moral destiny."[48] Similarly, Hegel suggests that "after the creation of the natural universe, man appears on the scene as the antithesis of nature; he is the being who raises himself up into a second world. . . . The province of the spirit is created by man himself," and it is man's translation of the kingdom of God into actuality.[49] This recurring theme of culture as a second, higher nature underscores the unique combination of autonomous transformation and stability that characterizes cultural causality. Culture is simultaneously like and unlike nature. It is similar to nature because it is an objective realm. But it is opposed to nature because it works upon nature to transform it. However, for this transformation to be more than arbitrary change, the world of culture must consist of products embodying universally valid ideas. Unlike the senseless regularity of the mechanism of nature, actions in the realm of culture must be governed by rationally binding ideals. But unlike the purposiveness of a meaningful cosmos which is predetermined by an ultramundane force, these ideals must issue from and express the self-determining character of human reason, its "ability to create an order of meanings and values and to superimpose it upon the senseless causal sequence of events" (Márkus, "SC," 18). Culture is thus a second or higher nature, a nature that has been spiritualized.[50]

---

47. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 228.

48. Kant, "Mutmasslicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte," 11:95; "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History," in *Pol. Writ.,* 228.

49. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History,* trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 44.

50. Note, however, that "second nature" can also refer to an artificially produced nature that is not infused with morality and lacking in harmonious unity. Schelling refers to the legal order in this way in *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), pp, 193–98. For Georg Lukács, the crisis of the novel stems from the loss of organic unity in modernity. See *The Theory of the Novel,* trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 62–65.

Hence, *Bildung* is rigorously distinguished from mere civilization, which is concerned with external, sensuous, or material refinement. In Humboldt's formulation,

> *Civilization* is the humanization of peoples in their outward institutions and customs. . . . *Cultur* adds science and art to this refinement of the social order. But when we speak in our language of *Bildung,* we mean by this something at the same time higher and more inward, namely the disposition that, from the knowledge and feeling of the entire spiritual and moral endeavour [*geistigen und sittlichen Strebens*], pours out harmoniously upon temperament and character.[51]

Hence, "*Bildung*" was generally reserved for higher, inner-directed activities that directly embody and progressively realize the human *Geist* and its rational values, such as religion, philosophy, the arts, and also law and forms of political and social life.[52] It is precisely this autonomy of culture qua incarnational power and spiritualized nature that makes it a phenomenal analogue of the spontaneous auto-causality of transcendental freedom. This is why Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, as well as Schiller, Humboldt, Herder, and the early Romantics, saw cultural education (*Bildung* or *Kultur*) as important to progress and freedom and, more specifically, to the political state. Indeed, some of them regarded education as the state's most important task.[53] My

---

51. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species* (1836), ed. Michael Losonsky, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 34–35. I have substituted the key German nouns in this translation.

52. "*Zivilisation*" is mildly perjorative and "is used to refer to the external trappings, artifacts and amenities of an industrially highly advanced society and also to the overly formalistic and calculating attitudes and habits that were thought to be characteristic of such societies" (Geuss, "*Kultur, Bildung, Geist,*" p. 32). The standard study of the sociological context of the "culture"/"civilization" distinction is Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process,* trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), esp. pp. 3–33.

53. For a fuller account of the widespread argument about the importance of education for the state and Schiller's, Humboldt's and, the Jena Romantics' views on whether or not the modern state should play an active role in education, see Frederick Beiser, *ERR,* pp. 25–26, 92–110, 130–37, 229. See also Bruford, *Culture and Society in Classical Weimar,* pp. 184–292; and Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State,* trans. Robert Kimber (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

point is not only that these philosophers and thinkers, who were shocked by the atrocities and violence of the French Terror, regarded spiritual education as an essential precondition for fundamental change that would establish political freedom because such education would prepare the people for freedom by instilling in them social responsibility, civic virtues, and a knowledge of public affairs. These are obviously intended consequences and concrete aims of *Bildung*. What is important here is why these philosophers saw *Bildung* as a prerequisite for achieving (political) freedom. The self-realization and perfection of a person's characteristic powers is seen as necessary for political freedom because of the similarity between the causality of *Bildung* and transcendental freedom. Culture's political import is a consequence of the derivation of political freedom from transcendental freedom.

Thus, far from being a retreat from the political as we commonly assume today, far from being superstructural or secondary to the realm of the political, culture—the normative process by which humanity transforms itself and its external reality through the prescription of purposive forms, and the realm where human interaction is ordered according to laws and norms prescribed by collective reason—actually supplies the ontological paradigm for the political. In this view, political freedom is the spontaneous auto-causality of a collective body in which an individual's humanity can be realized because its norms embody universal ideals. By ensuring the internalization of these ideals, which become incarnated in individual actions, *Bildung* creates a firm basis of unity for collective existence. Any society or state based on *Bildung* would be free because it would be a harmonious self-determining whole that exhibits in its daily functioning a spontaneous auto-causality akin to that of transcendental and moral freedom.

Bildung is thus the imparting of freedom. It makes whole again the human character dismembered by modern life and forms a social totality in harmony with itself. One can find countless examples of this presupposition as well as its corollary, the polemical metaphor of the unnurturing modern state as a calculating machine. After characterizing *Kultur* as "the ultimate and highest means to . . . [man's] final goal [as a rational sensuous creature]: complete harmony with himself," Fichte proclaims that "the true vocation of the scholarly class *is the supreme supervision of the actual progress of the human race in general and the unceasing promotion of this progress,*" and that "the vocation of the scholar [is] to be the *teacher* of the

human race."[54] Novalis similarly defines the relationship between the state and the people as fundamentally cultural and pedagogical in nature: "Politics. The need of the state is the most pressing need of a person. To become and remain a person one has need of *a state*. . . . A person without a state is a savage. All culture springs from the relationship of a person with the state. The more cultivated one is, the more one is the member of a cultured state."[55]

This ontological primacy of culture to the political is not an antiquated feature of German idealism but an enduring legacy in contemporary ethical and political thought. Insofar as it is a fundamental axiom of any *normative* political theory that the political involves the transcendence of what is merely given, *the political is by definition a species of spiritual or cultural activity*. In Cassirer's words, "all the great ethical philosophers . . . do not think in terms of mere actuality. . . . It follows from the very nature and character of ethical thought that it can never condescend to accept 'the given.' The ethical world is never given; it is forever in the making. . . . The great political and social reformers are indeed constantly under the necessity of treating the impossible as though it were possible."[56] Heidegger is entirely correct to say (in the passage discussed in my introduction) that in modernity "human activity is conceived and consummated as culture" and that "it lies in the essence of culture . . . to become the politics of culture."[57] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has likewise suggested that

> The political (the City) belongs to a form of *plastic art,* formation and information, fiction in the strict sense. This is a deep theme which derives from Plato's politico-pedagogic writings . . . and reappears in the guise of such concepts as *Gestaltung* (configuration, fashioning) or *Bildung,* a term with a revealingly polysemic character (formation, constitution, organization, education, culture etc.).[58]

54. Fichte, *Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation,* in *Early Philosophical Writings,* trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 150, 172, 174.

55. *The Universal Brouillon: Materials for an Encyclopaedia* (1798–99), no. 394 in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics,* p. 88.

56. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man,* pp. 60–61.

57. Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950), pp. 73–74; translated as "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays,* trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 116.

58. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art, and Politics,* trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 66; emphasis in original.

But in a desacralized world where nature, including human nature, is primarily governed by mechanical causality, how can we grasp the incarnational causality of cultural activity? The emergent concept of organism became aligned to culture precisely because organic life-forms were natural phenomena that could not be explained solely in mechanical terms. Indeed, there is an intrinsic thematic connection between culture and organism in addition to the extrinsic affinity outlined above. The obvious organismic overtones of spiritual cultivation became especially clear from the late eighteenth century onward, when *Bildung* as an inner-directed process of spiritual formation was distinguished from the artifice of mere civilization and external refinement. But more importantly, the autonomous and, indeed, autochtonous character of culture means that like organic life-forms conceived epigenetically, culture is self-impelling, self-producing, and self-generating. Culture as a second, higher nature was therefore logically connected to the newly articulated idea of the organism as a natural purposive being. As Gadamer points out, *Bildung* resembles the Greek notion of *physis*. It is not a technical process that involves the instrumental use of nonintegral means by a power external to the process and its product:

> Like nature, *Bildung* has no goals outside itself. . . . In having no goals outside itself, the concept of *Bildung* transcends that of the mere cultivation of given talents, from which the concept is derived. The cultivation of a talent is the development of something that is given, so that practicing and cultivating it is a mere means to an end. . . . In *Bildung*, by contrast, that by which and through which one is formed becomes completely one's own. . . . What is absorbed is not like a means that has lost its function. Rather, . . . nothing disappears, but everything is preserved.[59]

But Gadamer's comparison of *Bildung* to *physis* is not entirely accurate. *Physis* cannot be resurrected to explain the causality of *Bildung* because in a desacralized world, where nature is blind mechanism, there cannot be any intelligent causality other than the technical causality of rational human action. Moreover, unlike *Bildung, physis* is continuous with *techne*

59. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 11–12.

because their relationship is mimetic. *Bildung,* however, is a type of purposive causality that outstrips mere artifice. But its purposiveness cannot stem from an intelligent, dynamic nature or a divine creator. To understand how the modern idea of organism satisfied these needs, we must contrast it with Aristotle's classical theory of epigenesis, which remained influential until the seventeenth century, and the mechanistic, preformationist, and early vitalist theories of organism that succeeded neo-Aristotelian biological theory.

Aristotle is generally credited with the earliest formulation of the organismic metaphor of the political body and its central tenet, the priority of the state qua self-sufficient whole to the individual citizens that are its parts. He famously compared the isolated individual to a lifeless, nonfunctioning hand that has been cut off from the body, a simile that resurfaces in Hegel.[60] The state is like a natural living being because it is the final cause and end of the human individual.[61] Like *physis,* it is self-sufficient, self-developing, and contains the principle and cause of its movement, change, and rest within itself.[62] Aristotle's definition of life is crucial to the organismic metaphor because it underscores the self-generating character of organic forms. Unlike nature, artificial, crafted things (*techne*) do not have an inherent tendency to change. They do not contain within themselves the principle of their own making because they are brought into existence or altered by "some external agent" from which they receive all causality.[63] Whereas nature exists, causes itself, and creates itself sponta-

60. Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.1253a, in *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens,* ed. Stephen Everson, trans. B. Jowett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also *Politics* 2.2.1261a; 2.5.1263b; 3.1.1274b (on the relationship of individuals and family to the state as one of unity of parts and whole); 4.4.1290b–1291a (comparison of the different parts of the state to the different functioning organs of an animal body).

61. Ibid., 1.2.1252b–1253a.

62. In *Movement of Animals,* trans. E. S. Forster, vol. 12 of *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Classical Library, 1968), Aristotle suggests that the constitution of animals resembles a well-ordered state. There is no need for a soul in each part or organ because each performs its natural function as a result of their natural and structural interconnections within the living body as a whole (703a–b). I am grateful to Alan Code for taking the time to discuss Aristotle's views on the body-soul relation with me. The shortcomings of the following paragraphs are solely mine.

63. *The Physics,* vol. 1, trans. Philip Wicksteed and Francis M. Cornford, vol. 4 of *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Classical Library, 1957), 2.1.192b.

neously and directly without the mediation of something other, *techne,* which is concerned with making something other, has no spontaneity and necessarily involves mediation.[64] The principle of dynamism within nature is its form (*eidos*), which is able to propagate and actualize itself. Consequently, nature possesses an auto-causality and power of self-generation that is oriented towards a final, intelligible end.[65] A living body is a natural body capable of "self-nourishment, growth and decay."[66] Its source of vitality is the soul, which gives it formal organization. The soul is "the first actuality of a natural body which has life potentially," and "whatever has organs will be a body of this kind."[67] The living body is thus higher than mere matter because it is a body with organs, an organized whole where its parts receive their vital movement and intelligible organization from the soul.[68]

Now, although Aristotle distinguishes artificial from living bodies because of the latter's intrinsic dynamism and auto-causality, he also characterizes the body and its limbs as "*organa*" or technical instruments. Insofar as the living body is an intermediary force that the soul moves to move other things, it is like a hinge joint of the soul. Although the soul is spatially inseparable from the body, it is qualitatively superior to it.[69] Hence, Aristotle

64. Compare *The Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. H. Rackham, vol. 19 of *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Classical Library, 1934), 6.4.4–5; and the suggestion in *De Generatione Animalium* 1.22.730b, in *De Partibus Animalium I and De Generatione Animalium I,* trans. D. M. Balme (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 55, that nature "acts like modellers, not carpenters, since it fashions the thing being constituted not by touching it through something else but directly by using its own parts."

65. *Physics,* vol. 1, 2.2.194a.

66. *De Anima: Books 2 and 3,* trans. D. W. Hamlyn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 2.1.412a11. This is the nutritive faculty basic to all living beings (2.4.415a-b).

67. *De Anima* 2.1.412a22–28.

68. Cf. Georges Canguilhem, *A Vital Rationalist: Selected Writings from Georges Canguilhem,* ed. François Delaporte (New York: Zone, 1994), p. 205. Hereafter cited as *VR*.

69. *De Anima* 3.10.433b, pp. 70–71. The issue of whether Aristotle's views on the soul-body relation is a dualism or a hylomorphism has been a subject of much debate. See the essays in Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, eds., *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). Although commentators have suggested that Aristotle's instrumentalist vocabulary is compatible with hylomorphism and that the soul is not alien to or separable from the living body (as in Cartesian dualism) but constitutive of its very organization and nature, the characterization of the soul as alien is a (mis)reading Aristotle's text calls for because the imagery of instruments and organs necessarily suggests that it is distinct from the body.

elucidates the soul-body relationship by a technological analogy of the craftsman and his tools.[70] The organic body is only self-moving by virtue of its fundamentally slavish dependence on the soul: "the body is the soul's tool born with it, a slave is as it were a member or tool of his master, a tool is a sort of inanimate slave."[71] Hence, the body has a subordinate status. It exists for the *sake of something else*—a purpose and a final cause.[72] The *organon* is an instrument that serves a function, end, or activity set by the soul. Different bodily organs exist to fulfill specific functions according to their place within the whole body as a larger organ. All are means to the soul's higher end.[73] Consequently, Aristotle's biological writings repeatedly characterize the body and its various organs using technological metaphors and analogies with saws, axes, hammers, drills, and so on. He compares the motion of animals to that of marionettes and catapults and describes the multifunctional hand as the instrument of all instruments.[74] This means that living nature, which creates itself spontaneously from itself without mediation from anything foreign or other, becomes constitutively infected with its very opposite or other, *techne*.

This technological modulation of organic life is not entirely surprising. Aristotelian teleology cannot rigorously distinguish between artificial and living beings because the relationship between *techne* and *physis* is mimetic. Art and life are both purposive and exhibit final causality because nature is the ur-artificer that art imitates.[75] However, with the gradual erosion of a cosmological worldview, the instrumentalist characterization of the life process opens classical epigenesis up to an entirely opposite interpretation: mechanism. Prima facie, Cartesian mechanism breaks with Aristotle's theory of the four kinds of causality. It reduces all causality to efficient causality by defining all nature as matter in extension and eliminates the

70. *De Generatione Animalium* 1.22.730b, p. 55.

71. *The Eudemian Ethics,* trans. H. Rackham, vol. 20 of *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Classical Library, 1952), 7.9.1241b.

72. *De Partibus Animalium* I 1.1, in *De Partibus Animalium I and De Generatione Animalium I,* pp. 3–11, esp. 641b–642a. I am grateful to Alan Code for alerting me to this passage.

73. Ibid. 645b, p. 19.

74. See *Movement of Animals* 701b; *Parts of Animals,* trans. A. L. Peck, vol. 12 of *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes,* (London: Heinemann, Loeb Classical Library, 1968) 4.10.687a, p. 373.

75. See *The Physics* 2.2.194a, 2.8.199a. For characterizations of Nature as maker, clay-modeler, or smith, see *De Generatione Animalium* 1.20.730b, p. 55, and *The Politics* 1.2.1252b.

conception of life as self-animating nature through a gradually expanded sense of mechanism that incorporates vital functions. This literalization of Aristotle's technological analogies is epitomized by Descartes's definition of the animal body as an automaton, but especially by La Mettrie's 1747 description of the human body as a vital clockwork or perpetual-motion machine.[76] But the apparent elimination of final causality is misleading. For like classical teleology, a mechanistic conception of life does not allow for an ontological distinction between art and nature, made things and organic/organized beings. Both are equally machines and products of technical design. Leibniz saw the organic body as "a kind of divine machine or natural automaton, which infinitely surpasses any artificial automaton, because a man-made machine is not a machine in every one of its parts. . . . But nature's machines—living bodies, that is—are machines even in their smallest parts, right down to infinity."[77]

Thus, mechanism is not incompatible with teleology and even necessarily presupposes it.[78] All machines have a rational maker external to them, who made them for a purpose or to produce certain effects. Purposiveness is merely displaced from a final cause within the organic body to the moment of its technological construction. To be sure, in this scheme the soul is no longer the source of movement for living beings. Yet, even a complex machine such as a self-propelling automaton or motor still needs to be constructed by an artificer alien to it and set in motion by an external energy source.[79] The continuity between mechanism and teleology repeats

---

76. Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Machine Man,* in *Machine Man and Other Writings,* trans. Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 7, 31.

77. G. W. Leibniz, "Monadology" (1714), in *Philosophical Texts,* ed. and trans., R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 277.

78. Descartes explicitly blocked any move to finalism on the grounds that the nature of God as an infinite being cannot be grasped by finite human reason. The conception of organic bodies as self-sustaining automata without any design leads to French materialism, where living machines are seen as outcomes of purely natural causal processes. See Aram Vartanian, *Diderot and Descartes: A Study of Scientific Naturalism in the Enlightenment* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953). On the other hand, György Márkus has pointed out to me in private correspondence that in Newtonian physics, finalist ideas are necessary partly because of the absence of conservation laws. The winding up of the clock of Nature by divine intervention is a physical necessity. This is why Newton insisted that "natural theology" organically belongs to a philosophy of nature (i.e., physics).

79. See Canguilhem's extended discussion of the deep complicity between mechanism and teleology in Descartes's theory of the animal-machine and the continuity between Descartes's and Aristotle's

the mimetic interplay between *physis* and *techne* in Aristotle. This is the philosophical backdrop for the debates between preformationists and epigeneticists in late-eighteenth-century biological theory that led to the modern concept of organism.[80]

Preformationism sought to address two major deficiencies in neo-Cartesian accounts of organic life: the inability to solve the problems of how a body-machine could be self-moving and how the complex organization of functional parts found in living bodies came into existence in the process of generation. Although it was possible, with some difficulty, to explain automatic movement by recourse to the art of the motor, the attempt to derive the complex formation of organic beings from movement and the combination of material particles through collision was far less plausible. Thus, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "organism" was used as a semantic substitute for the neo-Aristotelian idea of the soul "in order to explain how systems composed of distinct components nevertheless work in a unified manner to perform a function," where the reciprocal relations between the components were such that "the word 'part' seemed ill-suited to denote the 'organs' of which the organism could be seen as the 'totality' but not the 'sum'" (Canguilhem, *VR,* 81–82). Preformationists such as Charles Bonnet and Albrecht von Haller appealed to the implicit teleological presuppositions of Cartesian mechanism, which they articulated

---

conceptions of organic life in *VR,* pp. 207, 227–36, and "Machine and Organism," trans. Mark Cohen and Randall Cherry, in *Incorporations,* ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone, 1992). Hereafter cited as "M.O."

80. The polemics between preformationism and earlier epigenetic accounts should not be understood as a conflict between teleology and mechanism. Both applied various combinations of teleological and mechanical principles and, prior to Blumenbach, failed to make a sharp distinction between the causality exhibited by an organism and a machine. The conflict between preformation and epigenesis should be distinguished from the conflict between vitalism and mechanism, the latter being concerned with specifying the causal nature of biological processes. In biological debates, mechanism is used in a narrower sense to refer to physicochemical forces and not to the laws of classical Newtonian-Cartesian mechanics. One can subscribe to the epigenetic view of organic nature as a self-producing system and explain this epigenesis in either vitalist or mechanical terms. And although preformationism is opposed to the reduction of organic processes to physicochemical forces, a preformationist can also subscribe to mechanism in the broader philosophical sense. Unless indicated otherwise, I use "mechanism" in the broader sense. See Clark Zumbach, *The Transcendent Science: Kant's Conception of Biological Methodology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), pp. 79–86.

into a theory of *evolutio*. The successive appearance of anatomical formations (morphogenesis), they argued, was the result of the gradual unfolding or geometrical development of a preexisting germ and its latent structures.[81] Indeed, one could say that for preformationists, nature generates nothing! As Georges Canguilhem notes,

> Living machines implied a mechanic of their own, and that implication pointed toward a *Summus opifex,* God. It was therefore logical to assume that all living machines had been constructed in a single initial operation, and thence that all the germs of all the preformed living things—past, present or future—were, from the moment of creation, contained one inside the other. (*VR,* 79)

In this view, the formation of living beings also involves a teleological cause. But this purposiveness is not *of* the organism or *proper to it,* for unlike the Greek *physis,* which is self-moving and self-generating, its origins are in a divine maker beyond the natural world. Consequently, unlike Aristotle's idea of the soul qua form governing the actualization of new organic beings, the final cause is no longer united to the efficient cause. Because it evacuates physical nature of any purposiveness, preformationism is resolutely mechanistic in the philosophical sense although in the history of biology it is regarded as opposed to mechanistic and materialist explanations of life. Moreover, as Canguilhem points out, the organism is also a machine because every facet of its formation and its subsequent activity strictly adheres to the blueprint of the original germ (Canguilhem, "M.O.," 58).

In contradistinction, modern epigenesis argued that anatomical formations could not be geometrically derived from a preformed germ and that a mechanism of formation had to exist that could organize simple unorganized matter into complex organic forms. This theory of spontaneous generation, which views the formation of living beings as "essentially a

81. For an account of preformationism and epigenetic challenges to it between 1745 and 1790, see James L. Larson, *Interpreting Nature: The Science of the Living Form from Linnaeus to Kant* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), chap. 5. My thanks to David Bates for alerting me to this study. This otherwise fine study is not alert to the mechanistic underpinnings of preformationism. For a more philosophical reconstruction, see Peter McLaughlin, *Kant's Critique of Teleology in Biological Explanation: Antinomy and Teleology* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1990), pp. 8–24. See also Helmut Müller-Sievers, *Self-Generation. Biology, Philosophy, and Literature Around 1800* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997), chap. 1.

matter of the apposition of material particles moved by the forces dwelling in matter," gained more credence in the second half of the eighteenth century because the improved technology of microscopic examination revealed the presence of a series of nonpreformed structures in the generative process.[82] But although modern epigenesis broke with the finalist presuppositions of preformationism, its earlier proponents (Buffon, Maupertuis, and Wolff), who argued that organic forms arose out of the combination of various seminal and nutritional fluids, were nevertheless forced to appeal to a soul-like, intelligible mechanism of formation. Yet, it was unclear how simple mechanical forces that were mysterious and unobservable (such as affinity, which was loosely based on Newtonian attraction, or a *vis essentialis*) could give rise to the complex systematicity of organic structures and their unfailing development from simple elements. Early epigenetic theories enabled generation to be conceived as a self-contained and self-causing process. But the autonomy accorded to living nature remained very limited since nature was also emptied of purposiveness. The organism remains imprisoned by a mechanistic framework and is not fundamentally different from a machine.

Blumenbach's vitalist theory of epigenesis (first formulated in 1781) was pathbreaking because it sharply distinguished the living organism from an artificial machine. He argued that a living body was created by a *Bildungstrieb,* a formative drive which was also responsible for the body's continuing regeneration: "in all living creatures, there is a particular, innate, lifelong, active, effective force (*Trieb*) that confers a determinate form, afterward preserves it, and when this is deranged, where possible, restores it."[83] He cautioned that "*Bildungstrieb*" was merely a name by which we could understand a group of observable a posteriori effects and not a principle that explained the ultimate end of generation. Nevertheless, from a philosophical perspective, it was a purposive causality within vital processes, a final cause constitutive of and immanent to the organism. Regular harmony in fertilization and morphogenesis indicated a purposive causality that exceeded the mechanism of nature. But since no preformed germ was detected in seminal fluids prior to fertilization, this organic form did not issue from a divine hand. It was spontaneously generated from

82. Larson, *Interpreting Nature,* p. 161.

83. Blumenbach, *Über den Bildungstrieb und das Zeugungsgeschäfte,* quoted in Larson, *Interpreting Nature,* p. 159. See also Nicholas Jardine, *The Scenes of Inquiry,* pp. 22–28.

within the organism, and could undergo deviations as a result of changes in physical conditions that acted as external stimuli.[84]

Blumenbach's theory liberated life processes from divine preformation because it defined the organism as a self-organizing being that causes its own motility and self-perpetuation, an internally organized complex structure or totality capable of auto-construction, auto-maintenance, auto-regulation, auto-repair, and auto-genesis. As Larson suggests, Blumenbachian epigenesis is the organic counterpart of the declaration of human rights. It is "a declaration of the rights of nature in the name of rational science" that "opposed the prejudice of immutability in the world of living forms and treated nature as an autonomous power, pursuing, by means of her own forces, the continuities of her own development."[85] Henceforth, the organism is differentiated from the machine in three respects: first, whereas a machine cannot construct or repair itself and therefore always presupposes a fundamental dependence on a creator external to it to give it purpose and movement, an organism is self-forming. It grows and develops from within with reference to an end immanent to its own nature. Second, whereas a machine is merely the sum of its parts, an organism is a totality that is greater than the combination of its organs. The organs coexist and are intrinsically related to the whole with which they form a harmonious unity. Finally, despite its immanent purposiveness, an organism exhibits greater variability in its activity than a machine because its causality is more vulnerable to changes in surrounding conditions. Life is aleatory.

Most importantly, this definition of a living organism as spontaneously self-organizing enforced a strict ontological distinction within nature between living and nonliving beings. As Michel Foucault points out, in most of eighteenth-century natural history, "the terms organized and non-organized defined merely two categories; these categories overlapped, but did not necessarily coincide with, the antithesis of living and non-living." However, in the period between 1775 and 1795, "the organic becomes the living[,] . . . that which produces, grows, and reproduces; the inorganic is

84. See Larson, *Interpreting Nature,* pp. 159–60. For a fuller account of the difference between Blumenbach's theory and earlier accounts of epigenesis, see Timothy Lenoir, "Teleology Without Regrets: the Transformation of Physiology in Germany, 1790–1847," *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 12, no. 4 (1981): esp. pp. 309–12.

85. Larson, *Interpreting Nature,* p. 133. Cf. Jardine, *The Scenes of Inquiry,* p. 33; and Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 272.

the non-living, that which neither develops nor reproduces; it lies at the frontiers of life, the inert, the unfruitful—death. And although it is intermingled with life, it is so as that element within it that destroys and kills it."[86] Life, Xavier Bichat wrote in 1800, "is the collection of functions that resist death" (quoted in Canguilhem, *VR,* 69). Life is the momentary transcendence of finitude.

Herein lies the conceptual affinity between culture and the modern conception of the organism's causality. As the incarnation of rational ideals, *Bildung* is a purposive nonmechanical causality. This makes it a phenomenal analogue of the spontaneous auto-causality of transcendental freedom. But because *Bildung* is a dynamic process of forming immanent to the subject of *Bildung* in its collective setting and does not involve the instrumental use of external means, it also exceeds *techne* or artifice. This kind of purposive but nontechnical causality is inconceivable within a mechanistic worldview. The organism, however, displays a type of natural causality that is isomorphic with *Bildung* in several respects. Its *Bildungstrieb* is similar to *physis*. It is spontaneous, purposive and self-generating. But unlike Aristotelian epigenesis and preformationism, the organism's power of self-movement and final causality is intrinsic and does not come from an outside source. The organism is also sharply distinguished from artificial things. This makes it an important means for understanding the nontechnical purposiveness of cultural processes. Moreover, the ontological distinction between self-organized/organic being as life and nonorganic being as death accords to the organism the same finitude-transcending powers attributed to culture.

The striking isomorphism is reflected in the use of the same word, "*Bildung,*" to refer to both phenomena. Goethe famously points to the epigenetic quality of organic forms as well as the products of cultivation:

> when we study forms [*Gestalten*], the organic ones in particular, nowhere do we find permanence, repose, or termination. We find rather that everything is in ceaseless flux. This is why our language makes such frequent use of the term "*Bildung*" to designate what has been brought forth and likewise what is in the process of being brought forth.[87]

---

86. Foucault, *The Order of Things,* p. 232.

87. *Goethe's Botanical Writings,* trans. Bertha Mueller (Woodbridge, Conn.: Ox Bow Press, 1989), pp. 23–24. Cf. Bruford, *Culture and Society in Classical Weimar, 1775–1806,* p. 258. For a fascinating

For Goethe, natural processes of organic formation and humankind's "possibility of endless development through always keeping his mind receptive and disciplining it in new forms of assimilation and procedure" constitute "a twofold infinitude."[88] The characterization of the cultural sphere as an organismic totality or the culture of a people as an organic body is a development of this analogy, which was also gradually extended to describe specific cultural phenomena such as genres or even individual works of literature.

The analogy between culture and organism had a special significance for German idealist philosophy. The organism is quite literally the basis of culture and of a teleological view of history, for the analogy was elaborated into an organismic conception of nature as a self-organizing whole, a system of purposes that historically culminates in the world of culture. Because the purposiveness of culture and of organism are natural analogues of the spontaneous auto-causality of transcendental freedom, they were grounds for the hope or conviction that freedom was actualizable in an otherwise blindly mechanical natural world. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy point out, Kant's attempt to bridge the gulf between nature and freedom is distinctly organismic-cultural:

> the resolution was envisaged in the *Darstellung* of the "subject" by means of the Beautiful in works of art (the formation of *Bilder* able to present liberty and morality analogically), by means of the "formative power" (*bildende Kraft*) of nature and life within nature (the formation of the organism), and finally by means of the *Bildung* of humanity (what we retain under the concepts of history and culture).[89]

Understood within the philosophical framework of its genesis, the organismic metaphor of the social and political body accrues a more progressive and rationalist genealogy. At the very least, one ought to regard it with less

---

account of Blumenbach's influence on Goethe and his economic theory, see Myles W. Jackson, "Natural and Artificial Budgets: Accounting for Goethe's Economy of Nature," in *Accounting and Science: Natural Inquiry and Commercial Reason,* ed. Michael Power (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 57–80. See also H. B. Nisbet, *Goethe and the Scientific Tradition* (London: Institute of Germanic Studies, University of London, 1972), esp. pp. 57–58.

88. *Goethe's Botanical Writings,* p. 21.

89. *The Literary Absolute,* p. 32.

cynicism and see it as more than an irrational reactionary myth in the initial moment of its formulation. If it is a myth, then it is a myth of enlightened reason itself (double genitive), with all the dialectical contradictions implied by such a statement after Adorno.[90] The organismic conception of culture was transferred directly to the ideal form of society or political body, which was viewed as an organism for two reasons. In the first place, the undesirable sociopolitical formations to which it was counterposed—the bureaucratic state of enlightened despotism or civil society—were repeatedly described as machines. But more importantly, insofar as the ideal collective is regarded as both the material condition for optimum self-cultivation and the highest ideal and product of *Bildung,* its functionings are by nature organismic.

Broadly speaking, all normative conceptions of the political characterized the relationship between individual, society, and state by the same immanent purposiveness and harmonious unity of an organism: on the one hand, the individual can only fully develop his or her powers within the collective. On the other hand, society and the state can only achieve optimal stability and growth through the individual's inner development. Only if both conditions are fulfilled can the collective and the individual be considered as a self-organizing whole and end in itself. To be sure, the ontological dimension of the organismic metaphor of the social and political body intersects in complex and interesting ways with the sociohistorical context of its enunciation. In this regard, one can mention the increasing uneasiness about the impact of complex machines on the character of life under industrial capitalism. But it is the ontological moment that has greater priority in German idealism. The state or society as organism signifies refuge from the atomism of industrial modernity because it is, in the first instance, an analogue for the spontaneous auto-causality of transcendental freedom. Modernity's destabilizing forces are a manifestation of the blind mechanism of nature, and the freedom offered by the collective qua organism is essentially the inner worldly transcendence of this finitude, that is to say, immanent transcendence.

The idea of immanent purposiveness put forward by modern theories of organism is undoubtedly connected to the increasing use of "immanen-

90. Cf. Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott,* pp. 168–69.

tist" principles in nineteenth-century political philosophy recognized by Carl Schmitt among others.[91] Once it came into being, the organismic metaphor of the social and political body was deployed in a variety of political philosophies, idealist and materialist, republican or despotic, monarchical or democratic, and even socialist and anarchist. It was used to characterize various forms of territorialized or deterritorialized political community such as the nation, the state, a cosmopolitan world federation, or a global community of laborers. The multiple forms that the organismic metaphor can take indicate that it is not inherently pathological or reactionary as is commonly assumed when we focus on some of its less salutary instantiations—for example, the connection between ideas of *Kulturnation* or late-romantic theories of the state and the violent history of German nationalism. Indeed, it is arguable that in their description of the *Kulturnation,* or the state as an eternally unchanging primordial totality that functions as a genetic principle throughout history, such theories espouse preformationist rather than epigenetic ideas. My intention is not to excuse these aberrations but to suggest a different way to account for them. Instead of dismissing them as irrational, we need to link them to the rationality of the organismic metaphor itself.

All political forms that rely on the organismic metaphor are different models intended to provide the optimal institutional basis for the actualization of freedom. Because the vital organism is a phenomenal figure for the auto-causality of freedom, these forms have as their common substrate a dynamic that subordinates death and artifice to organic life. That which has the capacity to regenerate itself spontaneously lives forever in some form or other. Hence, that which is free is that which has eternal life. This is the logical consequence of the definition of freedom as that which is the ground and end of its own existence, or which amounts to the same thing, the determination of freedom as the transcendence of finitude. We will now examine how this vitalist dynamic is set in place by Kant and its relationship to his idealist cosmopolitanism.

---

91. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty,* trans. George Schwab (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 49–52. Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy points out that communitarianism (including communism) and individualism are both based on figures of human immanence. See *The Inoperative Community,* trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991), p. 13.