ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

Can Change in Organizational Culture Really Be Managed?

Thomas H. Fitzgerald

Those who urge the direct management of corporate culture largely fail to appreciate that the deep-seated values, beliefs, and assumptions underlying that culture can rarely if ever be engaged by such an approach.

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By now, everyone in management has heard about Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y, but the misunderstanding that first greeted it (when he published *The Human Side of Enterprise*) continues today. Whether or not they actually read his book, many simply concluded that McGregor was arguing against coercive control of employees and advocating an ethic of self-direction and employee responsibility. Others missed the implications of the self-confirming nature of assumptions, which are continually reinforced in a circular process. Eventually, as with George Orwell's *1984*, or Rogerian therapy, Theory X-Y degenerated into popular slogans and media code words—two of which in this case are "good human relations" and "participatory management."

McGregor really wanted manage-ment to examine its assumptions about managing, to make them explicit. That process would expose invalid and limiting assumptions that "blind us to many possibilities for invention," so we would be able to go beyond "minor changes in already obsolescent conceptions of organized human effort." He recognized, however, that he had not been understood, and later wrote in (the posthumously published) *The Professional Manager*:

> It was not my intention to suggest more than that these were examples of two among many managerial cosmologies, nor to argue that the particular beliefs I listed represented the whole of either of these cosmologies. They are underlying beliefs about the nature of man that influence managers to adopt one strategy rather than another.

Whether or not "cosmologies" are correctly involved, his use of that term sug- 5

gests the ambitiousness of the task of change and is confirmed by his examples: ". . . the belief that man is essentially a machine that is set into action by the application of external forces . . ." and ". . . a mechanical conception of cause and effect," as contrasted to "an organic approach to control systems." Edgar Schein, in his introduction to the later volume, summarizes the earlier one:

> The essence of the message is that people react not to the objective world, but to a world fashioned out of their own perceptions, assumptions, and theories of what the world is like. Managers . . . can be trapped by these assumptions into inappropriate and ineffective decisions. McGregor wished passionately to release all of us from this trap, by getting us to be aware of how each of our worlds is of our own making. *Once we become aware we can choose* [emphasis supplied]. . . .

That final line represents the great unrealized promise of a generation of organizational therapists and an earlier, longer tradition of the more optimistic schools of psychotherapy. Despite the many disappointments of rational planning and intervention, both in organizations and in individual lives, confidence in the potential of awareness and raised consciousness continues to characterize the formulations and (sometimes explicit) advice of group and individual change theory.

As public and political attention has turned to the erosion of this nation's industrial base and the rise of offshore competitors, as seen in the problems of (among others) displaced employees and export deficits, a number of academic researchers, consultants, and business media writers have called attention to organizational "culture" as an important but neglected lever of positive change. Since these counselors borrow from each other, they tend to agree that improvement in business and industry must include attention to reshaping or replacing the style, climate, traditional character, norms, core assumptions, decision procedures, management attitudes, and other aspects supposed to compose that culture. The publications that set out in detail how this might be done are now too numerous to list here, and the quality of advice and proffered services varies too widely to permit critical analysis of each.

Nonetheless, it will be useful to recall their flavor and tone; for this purpose the comments of Noel Tichy, a reputable student of organization, will serve as well as any. Professor Tichy sees one of the most important tasks of top management to be that of deciding the content of the organization's culture:

> . . . to determine what values should be shared, what objectives are worth striving for, what beliefs the employees should be committed to, and what interpretations of past events and current pronouncements would be most beneficial to the firm.

> The transformational leader needs to articulate new values and norms and then to use multiple change levers ranging from role modeling, symbolic acts, creation of rituals, revamping of human resources systems and management processes to support new cultural messages.

In addition to the abundance of such texts, the mail brings announcements of conferences with titles like "Gaining Control of the Corporate Culture" based on "the critical need to understand how to manage culture," and offering to show executives how to

"infuse new cultural norms . . . instill enthusiasm and cooperation in every work unit." This instruction is facilitated in no small degree by its presentation in comfortable venues far removed from the shaggy denizens of mills, mines, and truck stops.

AMBITIOUS PROJECTS OR IRRESOLUTE GESTURES?

The enormous success of technology, combined with this country's historical optimism, promotes a generous confidence that expects any problem can be solved, any situation improved, with enough effort and good intentions. I brought this bias with me in my early work in organization. For several years, I prompted the establishment of "quality circles" and participatory teams in a multiple-plant division of a major corporation.

These activities, as is widely known, involve training groups of factory employees to identify substantive problems in production processes or product quality, to collect and share data about them, and to use a series of simple techniques to arrive at solutions for evaluation and implementation. As these groups are being formed and encouraged, relationships between supervisory managers and their employees inevitably shift because, when the process is successful, it can only reduce the direct control — and monopoly on expertise — of supervision and technical staffs.

Freeing up the initiative, capability, and self-direction of subordinates unmasks the deeply held authoritarian values of many members of plant management. Their resentment over their decline in status is expressed in delay, avoidance, disinterest, back-pedalling, talking for the record but finding endless excuses for inaction, discounting benefits while exaggerating costs — the sort of "confusion" games that can be expected in the state
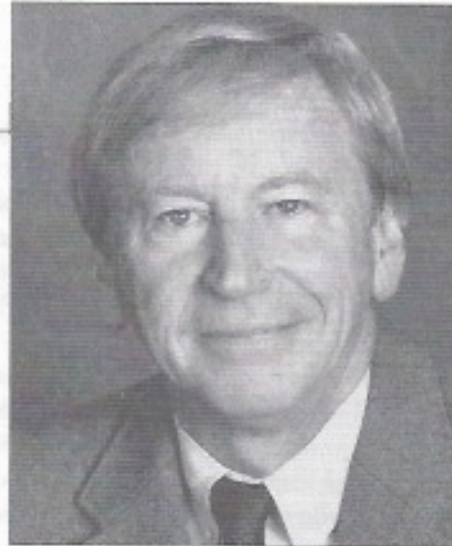
Thomas H. Fitzgerald *holds the usual academic and other relevant credentials, among which he counts an extended indenture in a major industry where he did research on organizational problems and, later, worked to establish employee participation in factory and office settings. He has consulted in municipal government and health-care planning and has helped to found and manage an agency to care for juvenile offenders. Currently, he helps voluntary groups in southeast Michigan improve their effectiveness. He has contributed some half-dozen articles to professional journals in the field of human studies. He is researching the values of work and working, as removed from a market/economics perspective, and welcomes comments from others with a similar interest (address: 396 West Washington, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48103).*

apparatus as *perestroika* trickles down in the Soviet Union.

Reaction to the dilution of control and expertise is not a superficial, transient matter. For technical staffs, it is linked to a mind-set that has led them to see the world as hard-edged, incremental, and orderly, a world where expertise is slowly earned and certified and where problems can be handled by proven problem-solving methods and precedent—the engineer's stock-in-trade. For supervisors and middle managers, the direction of employees has too often involved images of hierarchical standing and deference, military postures of discipline for its own sake, attitudes about winning and competitiveness uncritically borrowed from professional athletics, and a bumptious assertiveness as an ethnic/class style. For many men, control is also a "good-in-itself" and is connected to a common pathology—that is, loss of control as evoking personal anxiety and panic.

Trying to convince them of the opportunities for personal growth or even greater productivity that they might realize by giving up their "in charge" and "expert" self-definition—an affliction found among members of administrations elsewhere—turned out to be an unfruitful endeavor in many (but not all) locations. The school solution, of course, is that such change projects, to be successful, must involve planned alteration of the entire structure and its processes, continued and highly visible support and guidance from top management, a rewiring of the reward system, and reeducation of all members. True enough, it will work if unlimited resources of time and attention are willingly invested throughout the organization, but *that* requires the sort of end-state the change project seeks to bring about!

Despite my disappointment over those start-ups that got derailed, I came to see that underneath my liberal enthusiasm for a

more democratic climate of employee participation was impatience and intolerance that discredited those who stood in the way of progress. I could have recognized that when such a change project is announced by the leadership, its meaning will be transposed onto the private maps already existing within the organization and rephrased in terms of the uncodified background knowledge each member brings to the workplace to answer the practical question, "What's in it for me?"

Lessons about change efforts should go beyond one mixed experience; hence another account, which I hope will be illustrative: I was once asked to investigate why the manufacturing arm of a large company was having so little success in selecting and retaining women as supervisors, thereby failing to meet one of the affirmative action tests. The interviews we conducted with the women supervisors in its plants disclosed a repeated and quite remarkable pattern of harassment, intimidation, interference, rejection, and personal insult by male employees and many of the supervisory group, to the extent that some women asked to be relieved of the job, others turned down the offer, and all but the most hardy became discouraged.

The "cultural" issue was clear: Men who had spent their working lives together in a traditional factory situation were suddenly confronted with a home-office policy that imposed women as equals and bosses. Because of an underlying definition of women as symbols of nurturing, diversion, emblematic virtue, dependency, decoration, sources, and scapegoats—to name but some of the contradictory images—the men's sense of moral order was offended. They were also threatened by the loss of old satisfactions (i.e., woman as passive vessel but busy drudge), and challenged in their own reciprocated self-identity. Less obvious was their prurience and the sensed discord arising from the distractions of eros invading the ground of labor's

renunciations. All this can be easily classified and denounced as "macho" attitudes and patriarchal oppression, but to do so conceals its complexity and, thereby, the essential problems of changing it.

Perhaps predictably, little was done after the data were collected and I made a series of summary presentations to management, another failure for which I was nevertheless well paid. Even now, it is not clear to me what management could have done to change the cultural — can we say, aesthetic? — values of the workers, to substitute other, less "dysfunctional" symbols, or to dissolve the supervisors' resentment about sharing their marginal authority with women, especially since top management itself was equivocal about the issues. (Readers should not think I am unaware of those consultant groups that offer "consciousness raising" workshops on racism and sexism, or that I am unfamiliar with their content and methods, but an adequate critique — if such is yet permitted — would require another paper.) As with the integration of municipal police forces, however, over a period of several years the grossest forms of intimidation and harassment were proscribed, older employees retired, some women stayed on and were supported (in part

by other women), and the national cultural scene shifted. In the end, existing male-supremacy values were not renounced through conversion to a new ethic; one could say they were merely encysted.

THE IMMANENCE OF CULTURAL VALUES

Although the management of culture has been declared a needed instrument for strengthening organizational control and producing improvement, we can't talk intelligently about changing cultures until we understand how to change underlying values. Plans to change those, in turn, require a better appreciation of how the values themselves are structured.

A central difficulty is that values inherently resist the usual forms of investigation. The typical tools of conventional research — detached observation, classification, and measurement — do not work well in this realm because values do not exist as isolated, independent, or incremental entities. Beliefs and assumptions, tastes and inclinations, hopes and purposes, values and principles are not modular packages stored on warehouse shelves, waiting for inventory. They have no separate existence, as do spark

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plugs in an engine; they cannot be examined one at a time and replaced when burned out. Usually they are not readily disposable, cast off as one changes a soiled shirt. Indeed, they show a tenacity that resists change, even when change is desired, in no small part because they are jointly held property.

They have their own inner dynamic: Patriotism, dignity, order, progress, equality, security — each implies other values, as well as their opposites. Patriotism implies homeland, duty, and honor, but also takes its strength from its contrast to disloyalty; dignity requires the possibility of humiliation and shame. Values form a knotted (if unsymmetrical) net that we cannot unravel without altering their reciprocity, harmonies, and synergy. Put another way, we sense that values have an architectonic presence of foundations, gates, and towers, and a hierarchy of floors. Only a metaphor, but to describe them so implies neat linear dimensions and boundedness, while an examination of our own values suggests they exist in some non-Euclidean space, so we cannot easily diagram how they flow together, overlap, penetrate, and infuse each other.

When we speak about basic assumptions or "cosmology," as did McGregor, or about governing values or mind-set or *Weltanschauung*, we are not referring to a set of spectacles one simply decides to wear after sorting through the available selection in a shop, but to a way of being in the world. Ortega y Gasset wrote about culture's core of convictions and certitudes, *creencias*, ". . . not ideas which we have, but ideas which we *are* . . . in which we encounter ourselves, which seem to be present before we begin to think." These terms imply immersion in dense, circumambient, immediately apprehended reality — a commonsense place nonetheless, one that is never suspected of being an arbitrary social construction or contingent perspective. Values, beliefs, and principles are hard to

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change because of their verisimilitude. For most of the inhabitants of organizations, such matters are not established by deliberative process, nor are they afflicted by the hesitation and ambivalence — the continued interrogation of self — that characterizes many intellectuals.

Corporate organizations and quasi-public institutions can, over time, breed their own durable perspectives. Private truths often draw support from public or local truths, so that if inconsistencies arise, the strain can be better ignored. The socialization of long-service employees, for example, results in an isomorphic relationship of character and social structure, which produces phenomena manifestly visible in the older bureaucracies and the military: stringent self-discipline, impersonality, stability and predictability, and deference to rank, number, rules, and precedent. But it can also be found in less obvious forms elsewhere in corporate life where the technocratic mentality reigns. To quote Richard Pascale:

> The Western notion of mastery is closely linked with deep-seated assumptions about the self. The professional life of . . . many who move into management positions is dedicated to strengthening the ego in an effort to assert and maintain control over their environment and destiny.

WHICH THEORY OF CHANGE?

All of this suggests difficulty in intentionally changing organizational cultures and the people who reside in them, but I do not mean to imply that individuals are unable to alter their values and beliefs. Individual men and women may be shaped by circumstance and history, but as active agents they also make their circumstances and themselves. The problem is that we have no comprehensive theory to account for the process by which values are relinquished and replaced, either through the inner work of the person, or by outside

agency (inducements, coercion, threats, modeling, persuasion, whatever).

We also lack theory to explain gradual reshaping and "growth" (a favorite contemporary term), as contrasted with sudden conversion or *Gestalt* switch. Without doubt, masses of data are contained in back issues of experimental psychology journals on controlled experiments in contrived settings with college students as subjects, but their relevance for organizational life seems not to have been explicated. If objective culture is written into the subjectivity of corporate members, the lack of such a theory will continue to limit intentional efforts at its change.

A variety of possible methods have already been urged, many in the texts referred to earlier. At a colloquium I attended, the question of changing the attitudes, values, and assumptions of groups and individuals was raised. We easily came up with a list of more than 40 "how-to's." Everything works and nothing works:

• Disconfirmation and cognitive dissonance, for example, may work, but these are hardly reliable threats, as the persistence of so many odd (and even delusional) social movements testify. Besides, this sort of explanation is tautological.

• Leader behavior is obviously important for planned change, but in large organizations the formal leadership is usually physically remote and not easily visible across the wide landscapes of corporate properties. Visionary light, like any other, diminishes in proportion to the square of the distance, so it may not shine very brightly out on the shipping dock or in the union hall down the street.

• The selection of individuals for promotion on the basis of their support for official new values forces managers to ignore other desirable characteristics of all candidates, is limited according to available openings, and may be less than impressive to the majority of employees who aren't going anywhere and know it.

• Reinforcement by positive rewards is also a slow process, and is inhibited by intervening variables in the real world that can't be controlled by behavioral modification methods.

• Symbolic messages from above must compete with a dense stream of other messages from all over the larger society, and may be discounted anyway by a media-smart audience.

We also lack agreement on a theory about the conditions that support the formation of cultural values and that account for the hegemony of one competing set over another; recall that the failure to internalize officially approved norms is defined in social work as "deviance."

A more recently raised question concerns the consequences for the reproduction of practical knowledge, skills, and integrative values in the urbanized life world from continued intervention of—and "colonization"—by agencies of the welfare state. Another, long-debated European intellectual tradition ties ideology to a "material" reality and concrete historical situation, but revisionists have argued that ideology has become detached from those roots and is now merely manufactured, especially in the developed countries. There, great sums of creative talent and money are expended in advertising, public relations, and image management in an attempt to form consciousness through persuasion alone.

OPTIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

Some will point out that sterling leadership can and does change the (bad old) culture of organization, inevitably citing the exemplary Lee Iacocca at Chrysler or the many anec-

dotes in the books Tom Peters continues to turn out. *Of course*, there has been a gratifying improvement in the products and processes of American industry, but little evidence nationally indicates that cultural transformation, rather than astute management, was responsible. We did learn much from the Japanese, but their culture as such was not portable.

Not long ago, I did some research to document the lessons derived from an impressive turnaround of a medium-size automotive parts company. Instead of going under during the shake-out of the domestic parts industry, the company survived and is now prospering because its management amply anticipated and tooled up to meet the demand for precision machining required in the competitive market of the larger customers it supplied. But changes in the culture of its relatively small and scattered plants was never the issue; instead, employees who had been worrying about shutdowns gladly accepted the new emphasis on the goal of absolute quality after it was clearly and repeatedly established by senior managers and when nobody had a better idea about how to save their jobs. Then again, most of the evangelistic talk about corporate culture has not come from such businesspeople.

If it is culture that must be changed, most agree that the process must at least start with top management's rethinking of its current values (say, at a retreat) and deciding to

be guided by other orientations. Eric Trist, for example, says that critical choices need to be made at the level of governance:

> It involves nothing less than working out a new organizational philosophy [and] . . . a philosophy involves questions of basic values and assumptions. Those of the new paradigm are radically different from those of the old.

He is clear about what should be different: collaboration, commitment, and collegiality would replace the bureaucratic paradigm of autocracy, individual competition, gamesmanship, and alienation. The new order would be negotiated, participative, flat, self-regulating, and aligned to the purposes of its members and society.

Without doubt, this is a salutary, not to say religious, experience for any executive board, so it may seem a bit crass to call attention to the practical details of moving that process outside the inner circle — that is, to the employees. When they show up in the morning, they bring their own understanding of how to get along with all those other folks, an understanding gained from experience as palpable as that of top management. They may not have brought to awareness what works and what doesn't, and they are without a research design by which they can retrieve, much less test, their hidden assumptions.

· Were we to assemble the drivers and mechanics, the sales reps and supervisors, the packers and accounting clerks (old and young, black and white, female and male) and ask them to examine in an open, amicable spirit their values and beliefs, we would indeed present them with an unwelcome task. Many would be unable to articulate in a coherent way what they truly believe, although their values may be deeply felt and firmly held. Even in a psychoanalytic encounter, people have great difficulty, as Donald Spence argues, in putting feelings into words:

"Language is both too rich and too poor to represent experience adequately." If that is true of clients in therapy, who say they *want* to change, what can be expected from employees for whom change is someone else's agenda? Are organizations willing to give employees the support they need to deal with the disruptions in private and work lives engendered when they begin to revise their basic values, or the time to rehearse new behaviors consistent with those values?

An Alternative View

In all this lies an irony not to be overlooked. During the same decade that consultants and managerial academics welcomed "Culture" as another tool for improving organizations, thoughtful ethnologists (within whose field the concept of culture was originally developed and made central to their field work) had second thoughts about ethnology itself — that is to say, about their objectifying methods and colonialist traditions.

They question also their ability to appropriate the inner meanings of native cultures by external observation. Now it seems to be our turn to triangulate the natives, by applying social science expertise "to win hearts and minds" (to recall an odious phrase). But perhaps workers have the right to be left alone as well, to do their jobs without M.S.W. counselors or other accredited professionals' training them in correct thinking and tinkering with local sentiments, notions, and prejudices. If I view as essentially insulting an uninvited attempt to make me over into someone else's version of a better human being, should it be any less offensive to the hired hands?

Alternatively, we could seek a theory that explains how individuals protect themselves from challenges by an increasingly secular and manipulative society to their intuitively felt, taken-for-granted, and shared sense of lifeworld. In short, we need a theory of *resistance*. It would first discard Kurt Lewin's famous process metaphor (unfreeze, insert change, refreeze), which implies that those who cleave to values and purposes — instead of being just labile and confluent — are to be pictured as "frozen."

We might go on to ask why most consultants keep proclaiming the benefits of change rather than occasionally advising on how to arrest change, how to resist conversion. Their services might offer techniques for standing up to intruders with imperialist intentions and teach ways to defend one's intentional conduct. After all, what we admire about the Amish, the Sakharovs, and other "refuseniks," or the craft artisans of folk societies, is that they continue to be themselves in the face of subtle (or grossly powerful) pressures to conform. Much else that we care for, even cherish in life, has withstood fads, fashions, trends, and well-funded "communication." It was reassuring, therefore, to hear the president of a nearby major university declare recently that the time has come to set aside the melting pot and embrace diversity and multiculturalism, to move beyond tolerance to respect for differences. Unfortunately, he did not explore the political implications of such a policy.

Another irony is the rediscovery of ethics and values in academia. The business

schools (and some medical schools) have offered new courses and established endowed chairs in ethics, and added statements on ethical probity to their recruiting brochures. A laudable concern, surely, but it faces the same drawbacks with students and managers at seminars as do attempts to examine ethical-valuational questions elsewhere in society. For many these days, it just seems futile to try to talk about it, and worse, the discussion risks running off into slogans and conservative pieties. Why so? Because (I believe) the language of moral discourse has been corrupted almost beyond repair. To wit:

• Reigning economic theory translates all value questions into personal preferences, and instrumental utilities into rational calculation of cost-benefit exchanges;

• Positivist social science cumulatively disparages morality by explaining it away as a product of external forces and social factors, as "conditioned behavior," or as a screen for class interest or unconscious drives (while at the same time touting the value of its own value-free methods).

• With the permanent exile of any accepted moral authority, populist doctrine calls values "relative," because in an equalitarian society one person's feelings are as good as another's—"Who can decide?"

• The vast industry of public-opinion polling, market research, and attitude surveying has gradually thinned out discussion of ethical and other issues to the circulation of ephemera—that is, atomized, transient, and insubstantial reactions. The hurried pointing to a questionnaire's arbitrary multiple-choice answers—options detached from all context—unfairly represents our views about hard problems. But in the pollsters' world, people do not live with enduring beliefs and principles summoned to confront this or that problem in the polity; they are mere opinion holders who supply responses, voices on the phone who emit measurable noises, surface phenomena that can be made to change with tomorrow's media campaign.

Whether or not the official perspectives and hired-out services of the "cognitariat" have engendered among them something between disdain and contempt toward the values of the citizenry would in itself make an interesting study of how ideology is shaped by occupation. Even if this is an inaccurate assessment, serious public discussion of ethical, moral, and value-related questions will not be easy to mount and sustain.

Indeed, the road from X to Y and Z—or some other Alpha and Omega of organizational cosmology and paradigm—may be longer than the advisory fraternity has predicted, but nothing said here is meant to discourage attempts to find a way along it. We can see change in culture and values as a more intentional process than historical drift or determination by abstract forces; as rarely uninformed by circumstance; and not especially distinguished by even-handed debate. It can be described as aggregated tacking with or against the wind, whereby individuals attempt to deal with (or avoid) the tensions from competing personal, local, national, or even ethnic values against the background of everyday pressures from their surroundings. Their attempts at integration (always in the shadow of others) to sort out consistent meanings from among vaguely apprehended polarities involves untangling, rumination, realignment and, often, feelings of uncertainty. These motions are uneven and further impaired by the contemporary crisis of meaning and legitimacy felt in some sectors of society, and the facticity of other sectors or cohorts who move not at all. Over time, the whole mass of relationships can be seen to shift and readjust, but new fault lines, requiring new resolution, necessarily appear. Institutional leadership may have a place in all this but will be limited by the diffuse responses of followers. Finally, we need but remind our-

selves that not all we do is guided by manifest beliefs, rules, and rationality, but is "anticultural" and arises from darker energies, hungers, and cravings—from Desire itself, without which freedom lacks content.

ENVOI

Stewards from the Knowledge Class, however designated, who wish to improve the cultural values and assumptions of others will find good use in examining their own—not so much those they announce as those buried in research methods, linguistic frames, and conditions of practice. My present intention, as an ambivalent member of that class, has been to endorse openness to mutual critique, not only about its style of discourse, but also about the moral implications and unavoidable responsibilities deriving from its particular location in the structures of influence.

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A big book on the subject here carries the confident title *Gaining Control of the Corporate Culture*, edited by Ralph Kilmann *et al.* (Jossey-Bass, 1985). A generally broader and more thoughtful collection is *Organizational Culture*, Peter Frost, *et al.* editors (Sage, 1985); it includes an extensive list of references.

The "cultural" work of O.D. consultants would benefit, in my view, if it were to incorporate certain critical perspectives; to clarify that, I would only refer to (and recommend), e.g.: Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan's collection, *Interpretive Social Science—A Second Look* (University of California Press, 1987); John Fekete, *ed.*, *Life After Postmodernism—Essays on Value and Culture* (St. Martin's Press, 1987); Jurgen Habermas, *ed.*, *Observations on "The Spiritual Situation of the Age"* (MIT Press, 1984); and a volume of essays on Peter L. Berger and problems of modernity, *Making Sense of Modern Times*, edited by James Hunter and Stephen Ainlay (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

By now, everyone has at least looked through Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1987) but for the discussion at hand, his chapters "Culture" and "Values" are worth reading. "Anthropology's Native Problems" by Louis Sass in *Harpers* (May 1987) is a good summary of revisionism in the field of culture-science, while a longer and deeper analysis is *The Predicament of Culture* by James Clifford (Harvard University Press, 1988).