

STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Adorno and Christian Right Radio



Paul Apostolidis

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS Durham and London 2000

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This book is dedicated to

Jeannie Morefield.

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STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Introduction



“Will He or Won’t He?”

On September 21, 1995, the ABC news magazine program *Day One* featured a story on radio personality James Dobson. Dobson was then and remains one of the most enduring and powerful leaders of the Christian right in the United States. A psychologist and popular author, Dobson has been the head of Focus on the Family (Focus), a leading media organization of the Christian right, since its founding in 1977. Focus saturates the airwaves of evangelical radio with Dobson’s interview and news programs and publishes a vast array of books, magazines, and videotapes covering issues from child discipline to welfare reform. Nevertheless, the mainstream media have paid little attention to Dobson over the years, in contrast to its coverage of leaders who have more directly attempted to heighten the Christian right’s influence in the spheres of electoral politics and legislation, especially Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed.

On this particular day in 1995, the mainstream media had been drawn to Dobson because of his rhetorical interventions in the blossoming campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. *Day One* offered a general profile of Dobson’s efforts at Focus on the Family, although the main angle was clearly the possibility of Dobson’s entering the fray as either a kingmaker or a candidate. Dobson had spoken out publicly against the inclusive, “big tent” strategy advocated by Republican National Committee chairman Haley Barbour. Opposing compromise on “moral issues,” especially abortion, Dobson had dedicated two days on his nationally broadcast and extremely popular radio program *Focus on the Family* to publicizing a speech by hard-right candidate Alan Keyes. But

would Dobson attempt to channel his towering popularity and authority among evangelicals into a presidential bid of his own? So mused the ABC program.¹

Eventually, of course, it became clear that Dobson was not interested in running. A less sensationalist and more measured article on Focus in the *New York Times*, which had appeared a few months earlier, had been closer to the mark in assessing the politics of Dobson and his organization. The article noted that Dobson's "voice is clearly heard these days in Washington," then continued: "Despite [Dobson's] political talk, Focus is a largely nonpolitical organization, and it has attracted many people who admire Dr. Dobson's views on marriage, bringing up children, and a host of other family issues."² Focus, the *Times* seemed to conclude, in concert with the organization's own self-presentation, was primarily concerned with matters pertaining to faith and family, and only occasionally with affairs of politics. Neither the *Times* story nor the *Day One* segment was succeeded by a follow-up report. To the ordinary consumer of the mass media in 1995 who happened to see either of these pieces, Focus on the Family would likely have sparked interest only by offering a moment of controversy in an otherwise dull election. As the *Times* intoned and ABC implied, Focus had little truck with things political.

Three years later, in 1998, Dobson's name surfaced once again in the mainstream media. As in 1995, Focus's leader drew the attention of major news organizations by striking out against GOP leaders whom he considered too quick to abandon moral imperatives on crucial matters of policy. This time, Dobson's target was the Republican Congress. Dobson warned that if federal lawmakers did not speedily pass measures requiring parental consent for abortion, defunding Planned Parenthood, and abolishing the National Endowment for the Arts, he would use every means at his disposal to urge evangelical conservatives to boycott the 1998 elections or to support third-party candidates. To *U.S. News and World Report*, which ran a cover story on Dobson in May of that year, Dobson's challenge heralded a "major shift in the attitudes of the Christian right toward politics" and the "crumbling" of the Republican coalition.³

Dobson's threats to "go nuclear" against GOP leaders in the fall of 1998 never materialized. Indeed, just a few days after the publication of the *U.S. News* story major newspapers reported that Dobson had "sounded conciliatory" following meetings with House leaders. "'I believe the leadership of the Republican Party was listening,' Dobson said," in reference to his proposals for action on "bills to repeal the 'marriage penalty' tax, abolish the National Endowment for the Arts, and ban certain late-term abortions."⁴ Perhaps Dobson had thrown down the gauntlet to influence the location of the political middle ground as the 1998 (and 2000) elections

approached, by staking out a “purist” space on the far right. Perhaps, too, his remarks and their predictable casting in the media as examples of a confrontational, no-quarter Christian conservatism were intended to camouflage the extent to which Dobson and other Christian right leaders were actually operating very much within the boundaries of the political mainstream. After all, Dobson’s policy demands tracked closely the items listed in the Christian Coalition’s 1995 Contract with the American Family, a document that relied on focus groups and polls to fashion an agenda with broad public appeal. Following the 1996 elections, moreover, and notwithstanding the mixed successes of Christian right–supported candidates at the ballot box, the movement emerged with a stronger institutional base than ever within Republican party committees from the precinct to the national levels and with a new crop of political action committees (PACs) giving it unprecedented leverage in campaign finance.⁵ Whatever the purpose of Dobson’s 1998 actions, however, by the late 1990s major news organizations were beginning to take notice of Dobson more frequently. And this seemed to be happening because, in the words of the *New York Times*, Dobson had begun articulating an “overtly political message” with increasing intensity, intentionality, and publicity.⁶

Culture, Power, Ideology, and the New Right

This book analyzes the politics of Christian right culture by studying Dobson’s radio program *Focus on the Family*. Ironically, despite the episodic flurries of excitement about Dobson’s preelection defiance of Republican leaders during the 1990s, the media have probably overlooked the points of greatest political impact by Dobson and Focus on the Family. Focus is a major producer of Christian right culture—of organized, commercialized, mediatized evangelical conservatism. To understand Focus’s contribution to the reshaping of the American political landscape at the close of the twentieth century, it is important to assess Focus’s “overt” participation in legislative processes, voter mobilization, and party organizations. But it is also necessary to confront thornier questions concerning the politics of Focus’s cultural offerings as such. Such questions, however, seem inarticulable within the constraints of the ordinary public discourse deployed by news agencies like the *Times*, ABC, and *U.S. News*. For the mainstream media, as their interrogations of Dobson illustrate, culture appears to have political significance only when its agents publicly involve themselves in the institutional and discursive channels of governmental action and partisan competition.

This journalistic “common sense” presupposes a specific conception of power along with a particular understanding of ideology. Both of these

concepts require critical scrutiny. Here, power is a result of observable contests between individuals or groups of individuals, in which it is always at least technically (though sometimes not practically) possible to identify winners and losers. The former are held to enjoy power to the extent that they impose their will on the actions of the latter.⁷ From this perspective, "ideology" refers to dimensions of both the ends and means of such struggles for power. In terms of ends, ("an") ideology is usually understood simply as a policy agenda: the goal of political power contests is considered to be the installment of one faction's policy concerns as the agenda of the whole. The Christian right's ideology would thus consist of a familiar list of policy prescriptions, including a legal ban on abortion, the reinstitution of vocal prayer in public schools, tax reductions, and the denial of civil rights protection for gays and lesbians. The power of the movement, in turn, could be measured by assessing the extent to which these policy stands had been incorporated into the platforms of major party candidates and into public law.

Similar though substantially more sophisticated assumptions regarding power and ideology infuse most social-scientific accounts of the Christian right and other social movements. Since the Christian right's inception as a national force in the late 1970s, a continually growing body of empirical research has analyzed the factors leading to the movement's initial mobilization and subsequent rejuvenations, the nature of its successes and failures, and the reasons behind its victories and defeats. Explaining the movement's coalescence and activation has provoked interesting controversies. Scholars have described the movement's early mobilization as rooted variously in a reaction to left-liberal social movements, especially the student, anti-Vietnam War, women's, and gay liberation movements; class resentment directed at the "New Class" of knowledge professionals; federal policy changes and court decisions that unsettled previous norms regarding church-state relations, in particular altering the tax rules for religious schools and prohibiting prayer and Bible reading in public schools; the long-term growth of evangelicals' affluence in the postwar era, making possible the vast spread of evangelical churches and "parachurch" organizations such as radio and television broadcasting systems; and deliberate efforts by secular neoconservative political leaders to forge "fusionist" coalitions among "moral traditionalists" and anti-welfare state free marketers, centering rhetorically on anticommunism and emerging in full bloom with the Reagan-Bush '80 coalition.⁸ Thus in the vocabulary of empirical social movement theory, some analysts have emphasized the Christian right's cultivation of political resources while others have focused on its advantageous responses to structures of political opportunities; still others have charted the movement's engagement in a "political

process" incorporating these other activities while also involving changes in participants' sense of political efficacy.⁹

There has been a more limited divergence of views concerning the Christian right's achievements over the past quarter century. By and large, social scientists have taken a dim view of the hype over the movement in the left and mainstream media. They have emphasized that the movement has not gained any major victories in national policy (comparable, say, to the Nineteenth Amendment or the Civil Rights Act of 1964).¹⁰ Furthermore, the Christian right's record at the state and local levels has been uneven and liable to setbacks, notwithstanding the prodigious reenergizing of the movement that occurred with the late-'80s/early-'90s reorientation to the grassroots—witness the judicial overturning of Colorado's Amendment 2, the only state ballot initiative precluding civil rights protection for gays and lesbians to have passed during the high tide of these campaigns in the early to mid-1990s.¹¹ Virtually all agree, finally, that the movement continues to face the problem of facilitating cooperation between confrontation- and compromise-oriented factions, with the direct action, antiabortion group Operation Rescue and Christian Coalition epitomizing the former and latter, respectively. This difficulty has intensified with the end of the cold war, the corresponding decline in utility of anticommunism as a unifying concern, and the endurance of legislative impasses on most components of even the supposedly accommodationist Contract with the American Family.¹²

These scholars' chastening of alarmists who lament the approaching takeover of the government by religious "extremists" is salutary, to a degree. However, their nearly ubiquitous emphasis on the debilitating effects of the movement's internal tensions and repetitious predictions of the movement's imminent centripetal breakup are somewhat misleading. We should question the assumption of social scientists and journalists alike that a major policy triumph for the Christian right can by definition only involve those "moral" issues, like abortion, school prayer, and homosexuality, that are the movement's most distinctive and widely publicized concerns. Simply because an issue bridges the demands of secular and religious conservatives does not automatically disqualify it as an indicator of Christian right strength. The Christian right contributed vital support at mass and elite levels alike to the Reaganites' "counterinsurgency" efforts in Latin America, the Bush administration's war on Iraq, and the bipartisan elimination of aid to the poor that culminated (at least temporarily) in Bill Clinton's signing of the Republican bill to abolish the federal entitlement to financial assistance for poor women and children.¹³ More generally, tension within a movement may not always be a source of weakness. Instead, as Sara Diamond argues, internal diversity—even con-

tentious or acrimonious diversity—can be a sign of maturity, strength, and flexibility: “A political movement is successful to the extent that it can accommodate many different types of organizations, so that activists of different dispositions can find useful outlets for their talents.”¹⁴

In addition, social movement analysis need not limit itself to assessing the Christian right’s political power solely in terms of its capacities to influence public policy and elections. Diamond suggests a broader conception of movement power when she calls attention to the new right’s role in forging “consent” to established class relations through “educational and cultural institutions, such as churches, schools and the mass media.” She points out, moreover, that the class valences of new right culture can be complex and perhaps contradictory. For although these institutions “are strongly influenced by society’s dominant economic elites . . . they also partially reflect and serve the interests of other classes.”¹⁵ Such a view contrasts markedly with the more common approach that (1) measures the Christian right’s power in terms of the numbers of activists it has mobilized, dollars it has raised, bills it has helped pass, and candidates it has assisted in electing; and (2) understands the movement’s ideology in terms of a one-dimensional continuum running from “confrontational” to “compromise-oriented,” and as a uniform, self-consistent “thing” that adherents somehow possess, just as they might own an anti-abortion bumper sticker expressing “their” ideology.

Understanding the politics of Christian right culture in nonreductive, more nuanced terms comprises the central task of this book. This project begins by assuming that culture can be politically consequential even when it does not directly address public policy issues or align itself with specific party leaders. The notion that culture’s intrinsic qualities—the narrative forms employed by a religious tradition, the internal logic of a philosophical system, or the formal-aesthetic qualities of an artistic movement—can encode and emanate dynamics of social power was classically formulated in Marx’s critique of religion. To be sure, Marx drew attention to religion’s strategic cooperation with capital to attain “political” goals in the conventional sense. For example, he denounced the “conspiracy of the Church with monopoly capital” to facilitate the passage of laws hostile to the working class, such as those that closed down public-houses on Sundays.¹⁶ But for Marx, the political significance of religion in general was much more far-reaching: “This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. . . . Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”¹⁷ Religion has

power, for Marx, inasmuch as it epitomizes the worker's misrecognition of her objective misery. Religion reflects this situation—though in an “inverted” fashion—in its very essence, for instance in the yearning for an afterlife of peace and fulfillment. And religion reproduces oppression, by tranquilizing any stirrings of critical consciousness. Culture thus appears as a realm of power—and, more specifically, a domain where the political rule of the bourgeoisie is legitimated—without there needing to be an “overt” or direct connection to party or policy. Here, ideology operates in religion's cultivation of the inchoate sense that it would be futile to challenge structural power relations and that capitalist relations and bourgeois law are natural and God-given, rather than functioning (only) in the conscious and deliberate formulation of programs for reform or reaction. Nevertheless, in this passage from Marx, culture is clearly neither simply ideological nor exclusively a field of domination. For even religion, which for Marx was idealism in its quintessential form, is not merely a way to mask the true sources of misery but also “a protest against real suffering.” This implies that a radical approach to religion does not merely dismiss it as a pack of capitalist lies, but tries to convert its protestative strength into different modes of historically concrete expression. In sum, using the example of religion, Marx shows that culture has political significance in three distinctive ways, at once reflecting, reproducing, and contesting power.

Marx's provocation to consider the politics of culture as a complex array of disparate and potentially contradictory effects provides a general orientation for this study of Focus on the Family. The organized, mediatized culture of the Christian right is most emphatically political, as this book demonstrates. It is political, not just because it provides a regular soapbox for the leaders of the movement's electoral and legislative projects. Nor is it political simply because it prepares the psychological ground for new right activists by inculcating horror at abortion, disgust at homosexuality, fear of adolescent sex, and a range of other issue-related *dispositions* (as well as, often, specific positions). Certainly, there is an instrumental relationship between Focus on the Family and the Christian Coalition or the Family Research Council (FRC), the leading arms of the Christian right in electoral, party, and legislative affairs. Focus generates networks of secondary associations (extending both family and church ties), patterns of everyday living (involving above all a receptivity to particular media styles and sources), and general social attitudes (such as those mentioned above), which facilitate attempts by the Coalition and the FRC to organize their constituencies on behalf of very conservative Republican candidates and proposals. In point of fact, the consumers of Focus's products have been regimented into mailing lists for lobbying and fundraising by the FRC

for the benefit of Republican causes.¹⁸ Yet Focus's cultural products are also political *in themselves*, and they are political in ways that are more complex and ambiguous than one might imagine from most accounts of the movement in the major media and the annals of social science. In short, the political significance of Christian right organized culture lies not only in its strategic relationship to new right political activism but also in its expression, reinforcement, and contestation of contemporary, social-structural relations of power.

The New Conservatism and Cultural Theory

If the mainstream media and social science literature on the Christian right have mostly declined to address the politics of conservative culture in other than instrumentalizing and subordinating terms, the same cannot be said of all academic writing on the new right. The political purchase of conservative culture has received central attention in some notable recent accounts of the rise of the new right in the United States and abroad. As one might expect, given the dominant intellectual currents of the past few decades, these studies have drawn more heavily on Foucault (or "post-Marxist" writings influenced by Foucault along with Lacan and Derrida) than on Marx in mapping the circulation of power through cultural passages, although they have also adapted Gramsci's concern with cultural politics. Stuart Hall, for example, has analyzed the new right in Great Britain as a hegemonic project to enable certain ways of making political sense of "everyday experience" in an era of social, economic, and national crisis:

. . . Thatcherism discovered a powerful means of translating economic doctrine into the language of experience, moral imperative and common sense, thus providing a 'philosophy' in the broader sense—an alternative *ethic* to that of the 'caring society'. . . . The essence of the British people was identified with self-reliance and personal responsibility, as against the image of the over-taxed individual, enervated by welfare-state 'coddling', his or her moral fibre irrevocably sapped by 'state handouts'. . . . [Thatcherism] began to be spoken in the mid-1970s—and, in its turn, to 'speak'—to define—the crisis: what it was and how to get out of it. The crisis has begun to be 'lived' in its terms. This is a new kind of taken-for-grantedness; a reactionary common sense, harnessed to the practices and solutions of the radical right and the class forces it now aspires to represent.¹⁹

Hall shows how the British new right anchored its political power in a reconstructed sense of national identity. This identity was forged not sim-

ply through official political discourse, such as public statements by Margaret Thatcher, but more specifically through the conjuncture of such rhetoric with more local and informal levels of experience and knowledge. In particular, Hall contends, ordinary frustrations like passing time “in the waiting-rooms of an overburdened National Health Service” or changing daily routines in response to growing crime rates furnished the experiential, cultural context that lent validity to Thatcherite discourse.²⁰ The basic point here is that the cultural realm of everyday life is a terrain where political struggle is inevitably waged, rather than being merely auxiliary to politics.

Lauren Berlant has taken a complementary approach to charting the generation of a new notion of citizenship by the new right, among other cultural-political forces, in the United States. The antiabortion movement, in particular, has been effective not just in gaining legal reforms and influencing elections but also—perhaps more profoundly—in reconstituting the “conditions of American citizenship,” the “aggregate meaning of nature, identity, and the body in the construction of American nationality.”²¹ From a critical study of representations of pregnancy, the fetus, and abortion in magazines and films, Berlant educes the emergence of an image/concept of the citizen whose chief characteristic is its “fetalty.” Like the fetus, whose stereotypical image is endlessly reproduced in popular culture as it floats innocently within the womb, unaware that at any moment it might be destroyed, the “fetal” citizen is defined by her ever-present vulnerability to victimization. The logic of “fetal” citizenship has particularly unfortunate consequences for women, according to Berlant, because it facilitates their treatment as perpetually endangered objects of protection (rather than autonomous agents) in a host of policy and legal areas, most vividly in efforts to regulate pornography.²² Like Hall, Berlant thus demonstrates that the political efficacy of the new right can be understood only in a very constricted sense if it brackets out the movement’s cultural energies—for her, the labor of shaping and “embodying” identities, particularly those of gendered and sexual subjects.

Scholarly attention to the politics of Christian right culture specifically is limited but growing. Linda Kintz has traced the relocation of emotional investment “directly and intensively into the sacred site of the family” by and in evangelical conservative books, videos, and public events. For Kintz, evangelical sex manuals and Promise Keepers rallies do not just furnish cultural preconditions or stimuli for (supposedly more distinctively) political phenomena like the Christian Coalition’s lobbying efforts and recruitment by the U.S. Taxpayers Party. Rather, electoral activism and the enjoyment of cultural commodities and spectacles are interwoven in a contiguity of practices that collectively generate the “affective” com-

mitment or “passion” that, for Kintz, is the basic substance of politics.²³ More recently, Kintz has coedited a volume (with Julia Lesage) attempting to link her postmodernist take on the Christian right, along with several other pieces similarly attuned to cultural theory, to empirical, social-scientific analyses of the movement.²⁴

These engagements with new right social movements, interventions that highlight the significance of culture for conceptualizing the movement’s political power, model several analytical precepts incorporated in this book. Above all, like the works mentioned above, this account of Christian right culture presupposes that a cultural phenomenon’s political meaning is never wholly determined by its intrinsic features, although a close and thorough examination of these characteristics is indispensable to a successful critique. Rather, the high political stakes of cultural production—and cultural criticism—come to the fore when we analyze the place of cultural objects within structures of social power and fields of struggle. The politics of Promise Keepers become evident in some respects, for example, when its representations of masculinity are shown to carry antifeminist assumptions and traces of the Protestant-capitalist ethic. But a more complete picture of Promise Keepers’ politics emerges, with significant implications for any plan of opposition to the organization, when we consider Promise Keepers’ relationship to the historical moment of its emergence. This moment may be fruitfully characterized in terms of multiple and varying conceptions of power—perhaps as an era of crisis in gender identities, or as a period of intensifying class conflict. The key point in general, however, is that the political consequences of culture can be drawn especially vigorously when the theorist forges connections between a given cultural object and a historically elaborated domain that transcends the boundaries of the object itself.

In addition, this book draws lessons from these other studies by examining new right culture microscopically and, in a sense, sympathetically. If the goal here is to identify Christian right culture’s entanglement with the operations of social power, then it is vital to assume an interpretative position near enough to specific cultural phenomena to sense their complex interactions with historical conditions. And it is equally crucial not to prejudge the ethical and cognitive sensibilities at work in these phenomena, as many critics of the Christian right do. Those who are not adherents or supporters of the movement can come to understand the reasons for its power all the more vividly the more they allow themselves a spontaneous response to the movement’s appeals to widely shared hopes, fears, and experiences. This is precisely what Hall is getting at when he stresses that the embrace of Thatcherism constituted a “rational” and “ethical” response by British workers and other citizens, because Thatcherism

translated into discourse the everyday annoyances and profound hardships of life under a self-contradictory social-democratic program. Similarly, Kintz urges her readers to try to hear Christian right rhetoric, or imagine listening to it, from the positions of a great many women today who “are destroyed by anxiety, as they question whether they are good enough and as they try to find their identity in accomplishments, paychecks, and titles,” all the while feeling “deep, profound, inarticulable worries about children” and therefore responding to a discourse that “addresses them as mothers.”²⁵ As both Hall and Kintz argue, an approach that listens closely and with some measure of earnest sympathy to Christian right culture gains the ability to identify the experiential elements within these cultural phenomena that do not necessarily or exclusively have to be articulated to the new conservatism, but can be affirmed and addressed in more radical venues.

This study is particularly concerned with the relationship between Christian right culture and certain broadly shared experiences of the post-Fordist political economy: the increasing exclusivity and declining quality of health care and other social services, the undermining of democratic accountability in elections and the public sphere, and the long backlash against movements to empower women, minorities, and children. The analysis of the radio program *Focus on the Family* here shows not only that certain elements of conservative culture *can* be turned to alternative purposes, but moreover that Christian right culture, at least in one of its most influential forms, already *is* in conflict with the social conditions it legitimates. *Focus on the Family* at once expresses, reproduces, and protests against these post-Fordist experiences, according to its very constitution.

The Dialectics of Culture: Reconsidering Adorno

Despite the affinities of this study with the projects in cultural and political theory discussed above, the perspective here also differs from them. Above all, it stands apart in laying greater stress on the abiding *autonomy* of cultural phenomena from social power relations. This notion might at first seem to conflict with my criticism of approaches assigning a supplemental, subordinate, or auxiliary role to culture in relation to the political, and my insistence on the political significance and efficacy of cultural phenomena. It also goes against the grain of much contemporary work in cultural studies and political theory for which Foucault and Gramsci provide intellectual beacons, as they do for Berlant and Hall. Yet the idea that cultural phenomena can be in some sense autonomous of social power relations is central to the *dialectical* sensibility that guides this book, a sensibility that this study in turn attempts to refine into a productive

method for the critical analysis of the present-day Christian right and contemporary popular culture in general.

Dialectics is conceptualized in this study as a methodological framework for interpreting the politics of culture in a way that keeps cultural criticism open to the following nearly paradoxical possibility. On the one hand, social power relations inundate any given cultural object, shaping its significance through and through. They wholly undermine culture's usual claim to provide a critical perspective lying "outside" society, just as they belie the assumption that the politics of the Christian right or any other social movement can be adequately understood through approaches that relegate the movement's cultural aspects to a subaltern role. On the other hand, the cultural object may momentarily transcend its entanglement in social power relations and raise a genuine protest against power. It is the insistence on the latter point that distinguishes this study from Foucauldian and Gramscian approaches to the critical analysis of culture.

Without a doubt, the politics of culture come to life when we view culture in a way influenced by Foucault: as a plurality of modes in which power circulates, of networks that always already involve discourses and institutions of law and capital in combination with those organizing pleasure, faith, and morality, in which the latter are radically indistinguishable from the former—since all, quite simply, are paths in which power is produced, moves, and operates. In turn, cultural studies has yielded profound insight into the new right in the United States and Britain by interpreting popular culture with the aid of Gramsci's theory of how "hegemonic" struggles function to elicit broad consent to historically specific conceptions of nationality.²⁶ Critical analysis gains something additionally important, however, when it considers cultural experiences and objects not only as thoroughly enmeshed in "disciplinary" mechanisms and "hegemonic" contestations but also as *different and apart* from these power dynamics, if only in the most transient and embattled moments. The critical theory of Theodor W. Adorno can aid us in elucidating this distinctively dialectical relationship of culture to social power.

The first two chapters explore Adorno's theories of cultural criticism, mass culture, and right-wing politics in some detail in order to clarify the important contribution that Adorno makes to my critique of a core element of Christian right culture today. Adorno is famous—to some, infamous—for having classically articulated the theory that "mass culture" in late-capitalist society is definitively shaped by processes of commodification and marketing and is therefore entirely ideological, in the sense of fostering a conformist subjectivity and an authoritarian social and political order. Such was the gist of the essay on the "culture industry" that Adorno wrote with Max Horkheimer as part of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

(1944). Portions of chapters 1 and 2 provide a critique of this essay, and my own approach to *Focus on the Family* depends more centrally on other aspects of Adorno's theory. Still, Adorno's extreme pessimism regarding mass culture's potentialities was partly justified insofar as the theory of "state capitalism" on which it was based provided an accurate account of capitalist society in the mid-twentieth century. This theory, developed by Adorno and his colleagues at the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research), emphasized the centralization of planning authority with respect to production and consumption in large corporations and swelling states and the accompanying constriction of the domains for autonomous, individual action. Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry, in turn, demonstrated the increasing envelopment of cultural experiences within these processes.

The advancing ensnarement of culture in the service of corporate profits was of world-historical consequence for Adorno because of the revolutionary potential he attributed to aesthetic experience, and also because of his distinctive conception of cultural radicalism. In sharp contrast to Gramsci, who viewed the synthesis of an "intellectual and moral unity" as a vital element of the "party spirit" on which the success of any hegemonic or counterhegemonic struggle relied, Adorno argued that the emancipatory energy of culture could only be released in cultural experiences that offered critical distance from all forms of instrumentalist thought and action—including party-building on the left.²⁷ For Adorno, "instrumental reason" comprised the "spirit of capitalism" in its advanced-industrial epoch. Under late capitalism, that is, the subject was on the verge of completely forfeiting the ability to reflect critically on socioethical ends, as consciousness and behavior tended to become oriented exclusively toward the solution of technical problems, or questions of means. For cultural experience to afford the subject any sort of break with these historically specific conditions of domination, the cultural object had to retain at least a residue of "nonidentity" with all instrumentalist processes, even though it was inevitably composed according to sociohistorical necessity. From an Adornian perspective, then, the progressive or liberatory aspect of the cultural object lies not in its positive contribution to a reconciliation of social contradictions assumed to be already existent, at least in a germinal sense (for instance, in the "state spirit" of the counterhegemonic party of the working class), but rather in its assertion of the *hope* for reconciliation in the face of actual, persistent domination. This critical capacity of culture is resolutely *utopian*, in the sense that it envisions a radical restructuring of society as a whole. But it is also determinedly *negative*, in that it does not explicitly define the nature of utopia but rather is content to let a dim sense of the utopian emanate from the aporias generated by culture's

manifestation of social contradictions. Discerning culture's utopian negativity, in turn, hinges on an interpretive approach to culture that at least initially grants the cultural object's claim to be something that transcends or is autonomous of political and economic instrumentalisms. It was precisely this autonomous character of culture that Adorno considered to be absent from the products of the culture industry.

The culture industry theory is still of some use in interpreting the politics of Christian right media culture today, since the techniques of cultural mass production characteristic of the Fordist era, which formed the historical context for this theory's formulation, have hardly disappeared. However, there were problems with this theory even in the period of its origination, when it seems to have most aptly described the political economy of Hollywood, radio, and other elements of the culture industry. These difficulties stemmed above all, as the first chapter argues, from the fact that Adorno carried out very few protracted and detailed examinations of individual artifacts of mass culture. Ironically, this made Adorno's theory of the culture industry vulnerable to his own critique of vulgar Marxism: that social theory uninformed by the sympathetic, microscopic, dialectical critique of culture in its specific manifestations loses its capacity to be critically self-reflective and begins to take its truths for granted as absolutes, because it lacks exposure to culture's negative-utopian resources. Nevertheless, Adorno took a significant (if hesitant) step toward this kind of dialectical critique when he analyzed Depression-era Christian right radio in the United States in "The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses" (1943). A critical retrospective of this traditionally overlooked text within Adorno's oeuvre thus occupies the second chapter of this book, setting the stage for the subsequent analysis of *Focus on the Family*.

The central argument of the first part of this book is that Adorno's theory of dialectical cultural criticism offers a potentially more lasting legacy for analyzing the politics of culture under late capitalism than does the theory of the culture industry. The method that Adorno named *social physiognomy* sought to discern the presence of society's contradictions in the self-contradictory composition of the cultural object. For Adorno, as long as society remained riven by antagonisms rooted in political-economic domination, no cultural object could ever be created in a way that was genuinely harmonious—for culture always reflected and reproduced social conditions. It was primarily in the analysis of "high"-cultural phenomena such as Arnold Schoenberg's atonal string quartets, Samuel Beckett's enigmatic drama *Endgame*, and Søren Kierkegaard's paradoxical contortions in *Either/Or* that Adorno deployed and honed his critical method, not in his more perfunctory and less individualized reflections on movies, re-

corded popular music, and television. Nonetheless, no inherent features of social physiognomy preclude its application to cultural objects that Adorno would have called “mass-cultural”—as long as one recognizes, as Adorno did not, that mass-cultural phenomena can have an internal coherence, that they can strive to attain an aesthetic wholeness and a continuity with a distinctive historical tradition. These pivotal qualities make it possible to interpret the ruptures preventing this coherence from fully being realized as *contradictions within a whole*, as opposed to mere breaks within an object that itself is no more than a conglomerate of instrumental effects. Viewing elements of highly commercialized and widely distributed culture in this way can shed light on their ideological tendencies, beyond those stemming from the employment of standardized production, stereotypical construction, and scientifically managed distribution and promotion. In addition, by following Adorno’s lead in taking seriously—though by no means accepting at face value—the claims even of mass-cultural objects to constitute an autonomous realm apart from politics and economics, theory can bring attention to the unexpectedly radical political sensibilities that such objects sometimes carry with them—even the products circulated by the Christian right’s culture industries.

Christian Right Narratives and Post-Fordism

Rather than moving directly to an explanation of how Adorno’s theory informs my specific interpretation of *Focus on the Family*, I want to clarify this relationship by describing briefly the path I took in developing my reading of Dobson’s program. My hope here is to give the reader a sense of how certain concepts I adapted from Adorno—above all, aesthetic structure, contradiction, and dialectics—came by degrees to seem capable of offering analytical leverage with respect to the phenomenon. I do this to underscore an important point: my method of examining *Focus on the Family* has not been lifted in mature form from Adorno’s texts, but instead has evolved through my sustained engagement with Dobson’s broadcasts. (In corollary fashion, this encounter with Christian right radio has been essential to the formulation and refinement of my critique of Adorno.) Proceeding in this way requires a temporary shift out of the dense, theoretical discourse pursued in the previous sections. Although this modulation might be slightly jarring to some readers, it allows me to convey how my critical approach has been elaborated more authentically than if I were to omit mention of this developmental process.

The material analyzed in this study is taken from roughly eighty half-hour broadcasts of *Focus on the Family* aired in the mid-1990s. These broadcasts cover a broad range of subjects: “family” concerns, most promi-

nently child discipline and marital vitality; public policy issues, in both the domestic and international arenas; health problems, both mental and physical; financial matters, personal and societal alike; and questions of religious faith.²⁸ In monitoring Dobson's program, I gradually came to the conclusion that what binds many of the individual shows together, more than topical similarities, are shared patterns in the ways the featured issues are addressed. It became clear to me, first, that narrative or storytelling constitutes a central mode of communication in these broadcasts. For example, a broadcast series on homosexuality examined in more detail below does not simply offer an objectivistic argument that gay men are "deviant" or that gay and lesbian politics are undermining the nation. Instead, *Focus on the Family* makes these points by having a "formerly gay" man and his therapist tell Dobson their stories of working together and bringing the client into a new, heterosexual "lifestyle."

Second, I began to see that often a unified narrative is conveyed by multiple and varied stories told in different shows. In each of these more pervasive narrative "undertows," various radio personalities on the shows who fit a particular mold fill in the features of a distinctive main figure, a unique character-type. Thus the individual stories of the therapist in this episode on homosexuality, the psychiatrists who discuss "false memories" of child abuse in another broadcast, and Dobson himself perform the continuous retelling of a single, broader narrative. This more general narrative, a narrative centering on the experiences of a compassionate, professional caregiver, along with the other two narratives examined in the chapters to follow, largely constitute the foundational aesthetic structures of the program. Moreover, these are distinctively evangelical-Christian narratives: narratives of salvation through compassion, humility, and forgiveness. Retold in ways that attempt to reconcile them to very contemporary experiences, they nonetheless establish a new phase in a historically continuous, religious tradition.

Finally, every one of these narrative figures is deeply rent by internal inconsistencies. To be sure, the casual, intimate, reflective conversations between Dobson and his guests unfailingly convey the impression of narrative coherence. Listening carefully to these broadcasts, however, I was repeatedly struck by the manifest contradictions between the basic aspects of each character-type. For instance, the figure of the evangelical professional represented by Dobson and others at first seems a model of universal compassion, ethical self-determination, and scientific-practical expertise. Ultimately, however, the "compassionate professional" reneges on each of these promises, refusing to extend compassion to certain kinds of people, abandoning autonomous ethical decision making for heteronomous obedience to a system of cosmic order, and offering the solace of a