

SECTION III



THE NATURE OF
CIVILIZATION



What is civilization? What is culture? Is it possible for a healthy race to be fathered by violence—in war or in the slaughter-house—and mothered by slaves, ignorant or parasitic? Where is the historian who traces the rise and fall of nations to the standing of women?

—Agnes Ryan (1952)

Sn Section Two, Chellis Glendinning suggests that civilization sprang forth after a long period in which its latent domesticating aspects slowly developed. A gradual, almost imperceptible, growth of specialization, or division of labor, may well have abetted this slippage toward a qualitatively new world of separation and control, as I have argued in *Elements of Refusal* (1988) and *Future Primitive* (1994). It seems evident that a struggle of contrary urges was involved; civilization never triumphs without a struggle.

In this section we are concerned with what civilization is, fundamentally. Does it have an inner logic? What is its core nature? At or near its center, its sheer authoritarianism must be recognized.

Michael Mann (1990) saw it this way:

In noncivilized societies escape from the social cage was possible. Authority was freely conferred, but recoverable; power, permanent and coercive, was unattainable.

A related fact is that every civilization in recorded history has routinely engaged in systematic and bloody warfare. It is hard to think of greater control, not to mention the grisly consequences, than that displayed by the institution of war.

Technology is another central locus of domination. Hans Jonas provides an apt description of this modern juggernaut, a cardinal fruit of the will to domesticate:

The danger of disaster attending the Baconian ideal of power over nature through scientific technology arises not so much from the shortcomings of its performance as from the magnitude of its success.

Civilization extends control over the natural and personal worlds, to ever greater lengths, in the direction of absolute manipulation.

In one of the entries in this section, the Unabomber cites the heightened powers of the modern order and the absence of fulfillment one experiences within its now global confines. Most of the other voices testify to other faces or facets: civilization as servitude and sacrifice, sickness, neurosis, psychological misery, frustration, repression, madness, frenzy, impoverishment, mass destruction, and self-destruction.