consumerism, and capitalism. Unlike the critique of mass society, which is directed at an institutional structure and cultural imperative specific to the developed countries of the mid-twentieth century, the desire for the authentic is set against the backdrop of modernity itself, which encompasses the entire development of the West over the past two hundred and fifty years.

The seminal text on the rise of authenticity as a response to modernity is the 1972 book *Sincerity and Authenticity*, by literary critic Lionel Trilling, in which he explains that the term comes to us from the world of art history and museum studies. There, the question of authenticity refers to a work's history or provenance, so to ask whether a work of art is authentic is just to ask whether it is what it appears to be–a Ming vase or a Rothko painting. To affirm that a work is authentic is to say that it does, in fact, deserve the veneration or admiration that it appears to demand or that it was worth the price that was paid for it. Similarly, when we wonder whether an apparently ancient religious artifact is authentic, what we want to know is that it was actually used in ancient sacred rituals, as opposed to being manufactured for the sole purpose of selling it to tourists.

This distinction between how something *seems* and what it actually *is*–the distinction, that is, between appearance and reality–has been giving philosophers fits for centuries. As used in the earlier examples, it is what a philosopher would call an epistemological distinction because the determination of authenticity hinges on our knowledge of a fact of the matter. This looks like an authentic Ming vase. Is it? It certainly seems to, though it could be just a very competent forgery. Either way, there is a fact of the matter.

One of Trilling's great contributions was to show how this distinction, between how things appear to us and how they really are, eventually acquired a deeply moral dimension. This is captured by the familiar scene from *Hamlet*, as Laertes is preparing to head back to Paris. His father, Polonius, is following Laertes around, peppering his son with dull bits of fatherly counsel. But just as Laertes is ready to yell at his father, he is brought up short by these words:

> This above all: to thine own self be true
> And it doth follow, as the night the day,
> Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Because Polonius is such a buffoon, Shakespeare scholars often write this off as just another bit of small-minded, selfish advice. But Trilling argues that this won't do because the sentence is simply too lucid, the sentiment too graceful. Polonius, he says, "has had a moment of self-transcendence," in which he has figured out that a loyalty to one's own true self is an essential condition of virtue. Trilling's reading of the passage is supported by the fact that the phrase "to thine own self be true" has passed into the language as a deft summary of an ideal that retains a powerful hold over our moral imaginations.

In its contemporary form, the moral dimension to authenticity amounts to the expectation that all the trappings of life,

including your hopes and dreams, your job and family life, will reflect your true human purpose and potential. It is a profoundly individualistic ideal, understood as involving a personal quest or project that pushes self-fulfillment and self-discovery to the forefront of your concerns.

Authenticity has worked its way through our entire worldview, and our moral vocabulary is full of variations on the basic appearance-reality distinction, such as when we talk about someone exhibiting an "outer" control that masks an "inner" turmoil. When we meet people who are living inauthentic lives, we call them "shallow" or "superficial," as opposed to the more authentic folk who are "deep" or "profound." When it comes to relationships, authenticity is closely allied with the notion of sincerity, which demands a congruence between explicit ("outer") avowal and true ("inner") feeling. And it is because we are so concerned with this alignment of inner and outer selves that falseness, insincerity, and hypocrisy are seen as the great moral transgressions of our age.

The winter of 2005–06 provided a remarkable pair of examples. That fall, the term *truthiness*, coined by Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report* to mock the prevarications of government officials, became a part of the popular lexicon, while a panel of distinguished linguists at the American Dialect Society voted it the Word of the Year for 2005. At the same time, a small pamphlet called "On Bullshit," by philosopher Harry Frankfurt, became a surprising international best seller–considering that it was a twenty-year-old article originally published in an academic journal. But right from its opening sentence ("One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit"), the book's message obviously resonated with a public annoyed by a rash of corporate scandals and feeling wickedly deceived by the failure of the American and British forces to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Trilling suggests that the way authenticity "has become part of the moral slang of our day points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences." What he is highlighting here is the biblical texture that permeates the whole discourse of authenticity: in the beginning, humans lived in a state of original authenticity, where all was harmony and unity. At some point there was a great discord, and we became separated from nature, from society, and even from ourselves. Ever since, we have been living in a fallen state, and our great spiritual project is to find our way back to that original and authentic unity.

What led to this apparent separation was nothing less than the birth of the modern world. Characterized by the rise of secularism, liberalism, and the market economy, modernity is the reason we have lost touch with whatever it is about human existence that is meaningful. Once upon a time religion, especially monotheistic religion, served as the objective and eternal standard of all that is good and true and valuable, and we built our society (indeed, our entire civilization) around the idea that living a meaningful life involved living up to that standard.

The search for authenticity is about the search for meaning in a world where all the traditional sources–religion and successor ideals such as aristocracy, community, and nationalism–have been dissolved in the acid of science, technology, capitalism, and

liberal democracy. We are looking to replace the God concept with something more acceptable in a world that is not just disenchanted, but also socially flattened, cosmopolitan, individualistic, and egalitarian. It is a complicated and difficult search, one that leads people down a multitude of paths that include the worship of the creative and emotive powers of the self; the fetishization of our premodern past and its contemporary incarnation in exotic cultures; the search for increasingly obscure and rarified forms of consumption and experience; a preference for local forms of community and economic organization; and, most obviously, an almost violent hostility to the perceived shallowness of Western forms of consumption and entertainment.

The quasi-biblical jargon of authenticity, with its language of separation and distance, of lost unity, wholeness, and harmony, is so much a part of our moral shorthand that we don't always notice that we've slipped into what is essentially a religious way of thinking. The ease with which we talk about our alienation from nature, or the alienating nature of work, or the suburbs, or technology, is part of this language as well, hearkening back to our ongoing sense that we are fallen people.

The quest for authenticity is a quest to restore that lost unity. Where once we did it through actual religious rituals, prayer, and communion with God, now we make do with things such as Oprah's Book Club, which offers a thoroughly modern form of spirituality that is a fluid mix of pop-psychoanalysis, self-help, sentimentality, emotionalism, nostalgia, and yuppie consumerism. Or through our obsession with anything "organic"–organic beef, chicken, vegetables, cotton, dry cleaning, chocolate, or toilet paper. Similarly, a growing concern with a more local economy–local farmers, local bookstores, local energy production–reflects an underlying feeling that the holism of a small community is more valuable and more rewarding than the wasteful and messy free-for-all of mass consumerism. Finally, there is the almost visceral distaste for the market economy, driven by a conviction that the mere act of buying and selling is intrinsically alienating.

In all these guises, the search for the authentic is positioned as the most pressing quest of our age, satisfying at the same time the individual need for meaning and self-fulfillment and a progressive economic and political agenda that is sustainable, egalitarian, and environmentally friendly.

My central claim in this book is that authenticity is none of these things. Instead, I argue that the whole authenticity project that has occupied us moderns for the past two hundred and fifty years is a hoax. It has never delivered on its promise, and it never will. This is not because we aren't trying hard enough or are looking in the wrong places, or because the capitalists, politicians, and other purveyors of the fake are standing in our way. My argument is not that once upon a time we lived authentic lives–that we used to live in authentic communities and listen to authentic music and eat authentic food and participate in an authentic culture–and now that authenticity is gone. This is not a fairy tale.

Rather, the overarching theme of this book is that there really is no such thing as authenticity, not in the way it needs to exist

for the widespread search to make sense. Authenticity is a way of talking about things in the world, a way of making judgments, staking claims, and expressing preferences about our relationships to one another, to the world, and to things. But those judgments, claims, or preferences don't pick out real properties in the world. There could never be an authenticity detector we could wave at something, like the security guards checking you over at the airport.

Lionel Trilling died in 1975, so he never lived to see cell phones and iPods, YouTube, the blogosphere, and Second Life. He missed out on the twenty-four-hour news cycle, $500 million presidential campaigns, and a built environment that wears advertising like a second skin. It is part of the ahistorical narcissism of our culture that we believe there is something extraordinary about the present. The pace of change is so rapid that we believe that our world is qualitatively different from what it was like even a few decades ago, and that our grandparents could not possibly understand the alienating pressures with which we are forced to cope. In some ways that is true. But part of this book's argument is to trace the origins of the authenticity quest, to show how, for all its apparent urgency and postmillennial relevance, very little has changed on the map since the battle lines were first drawn in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Another part of this book's agenda is to argue that the problem was badly formulated from the start, and that the quest for authenticity has–at best–amounted to a centuries-long exercise in rainbow-chasing. More worrisome is the way our pursuit of the authentic ideal has become one of the most powerful causes of *in*authenticity in the modern world. To put it plainly: the contemporary struggle for genuine, authentic forms of living cannot be the solution to our problem, because it is the cause.

We are caught in the grip of an ideology about what it means to be an authentic self, to lead an authentic life, and to have authentic experiences. At its core is a form of individualism that privileges self-fulfillment and self-discovery, and while there is something clearly worthwhile in this, the dark side is the inherently antisocial, nonconformist, and competitive dimension to the quest. The hippie version of the authentic ideal, "doing your own thing," means standing out from the crowd, doing something other people are not doing. This creates competitive pressures to constantly run away from the masses and their conformist, homogenized lives. At the same time, when we take a closer look at many supposedly "authentic" activities, such as loft-living, ecotourism, or the slow-food movement, we find a disguised form of status-seeking, the principal effect of which is to generate resentment among others.

17 highlighters

An even more severe consequence of the cult of authenticity can be seen in the urban–that is, black–culture of America's inner cities. In the jargon of the street, "keeping it real" ostensibly involves staying true to yourself, your family, and your community. In practice though, it amounts to a rejection of everything the Man wants you to do, like staying in school, working for a living, staying out of jail, and taking care of your kids. At best, "keeping it real" involves a high level of conspicuous consumption, spending a fortune on running shoes and clothes and jewelry; at worst, it serves as a justification for

ignorance or even gangsterism.

In the public sphere, the desire for authenticity has contributed to a debased political culture dominated by negative advertising and character assassination. Meanwhile, a misguided nostalgia for illiberal and even premodern forms of political organization has fueled the forces of reaction, leading many otherwise well-meaning progressives to make common cause with dictators, fascists, and Islamic fundamentalists.

Many people are rightly concerned that our culture is locked into a competitive, self-absorbed, and hollow individualism, which gives us a shallow consumerist society completely lacking in genuine relationships and true community. But this leads to an uncomfortable paradox. After all, nobody ever admits to being shallow or false, and no one ever claims to love the artificial and the mass-produced. But if we all crave authenticity, how is it that the world seems to be getting more "unreal" every day? The argument of this book is that our misguided pursuit of the authentic only exacerbates the problem. We need to find a way forward, to an individualism that makes its peace with the modern world while allowing for a meaningful life free of nostalgia, reactionary politics, or status-seeking.

But first, we need to understand how we got here. The story begins with the birth of modernity.

ONE

THE MALAISE OF MODERNITY

IN ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS ROAD TRIPS IN HISTORY, AN emaciated and notoriously untrustworthy Greek youth named Chaerophon trekked the 125 miles from Athens to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi to consult with the Oracle as to whether there was any man wiser than his friend Socrates. No, Chaerophon was told by the Oracle, there was no man wiser, and so he returned to Athens and informed Socrates of what the Oracle had said. At first Socrates was a bit skeptical, since it struck him that most of his fellow Athenians certainly acted as if they were wise about a great many things, while he, Socrates, didn't really know much about anything at all. But after wandering about the city for a while, questioning his fellow citizens about a range of topics (such as truth, beauty, piety, and justice), Socrates eventually decided that most of them were indeed as ignorant as he, but they didn't know it. He concluded that he was indeed the wisest Athenian, and that his wisdom consisted in the fact that he alone knew that he knew nothing.

Socrates should have known there was a bit of a trick to the Oracle's pronouncement. Inscribed in golden letters above the