

C.P. Snow — The Two Cultures, or: “Renaissance man is not possible”

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the Two Cultures is based on the view that there is a lack of communication between scientists and literary men. Snow expresses the view that the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups. Snow, although a novelist himself, seems to condemn the literary intellectuals in his advocacy of science as the most revolutionary force in the world today. He is convinced that, because science is essentially “progressive”, and the political views of the scientists are more tenable and workable, the scientists would possess the means – and the desire – to end want and disease in every corner of the world.

Snow is of the opinion that, together with their holding to dangerous and “anti-social” views on politics, literary intellectuals have “the strongest possible wish that the future shall not exist”. This is, to his mind, the most dangerous aspect of the schism, the lack of communication, for the scientists, to his mind, “have the future in their bones, while traditional culture [represented by the literary intellectuals] wishes that the future did not exist”.

Snow further attacks the policy of academic specialization in the schools and universities, feeling that this leads to the essential impoverishment to be observed in the intellectual life. It is this situation, he also feels, which adds to the inability of the developed nations to help meaningfully in the development of the underdeveloped and the undeveloped nations. He finally brings all his ideas in line with his concern with aid to those nations, but he cannot escape a certain paternalistic humanitarianism.

Charles Percy Snow (later to become Lord Snow of Leicester) has gained a place in English literary history both as a novelist and as a “man of ideas” (Davis, 1965, p. 3). Snow has had an extraordinary career, moving from the world of science to the world of letters² to the world of politics and ad-

1. *A Second Look*, p. 61.

2. He has an impressive list (about 16) novels to his credit.

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ministration. He was born in 1905 (in Leicester), the second of four sons of an unsuccessful lower middle-class man. Snow worked towards a university scholarship in days when they were not very readily available. He took a First Class Honours degree in Chemistry in 1927 (at Leicester). He won a scholarship to Cambridge, becoming a research student, before gaining his Ph.D. in 1930 and being elected a fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge.

Although he worked hard at science, he began to diversify, becoming involved in administration and the writing of non-scientific material and novels as well. "During the thirties, as fellow and tutor at King's College, Cambridge, Snow saw university administration at first hand. From 1930 on, he really walked the corridors of power. He recruited scientists for the war effort and helped to decide how they were to be distributed among the competing, understaffed war agencies" (Davis, p. 4).

Snow himself has described his situation in the following terms: "By training I was a scientist: by vocation I was a writer" (Snow, 1963, p. 1). This particular combination led him to the writing of the 1959 Rede Lecture at Cambridge, which he justifies in the following terms: "It was through living among these groups³ and much more, I think, through moving regularly from one to the other and back again that I got occupied with the problem of what, long before I put it on paper, I christened to myself as the 'two cultures'" (Snow, 1963, p. 2).

THE TWO CULTURES

The seminal address titled *The Two Cultures* (which, by his own admission he would have preferred to have called by the name he toyed with initially, *The Rich and the poor*,⁴ [*A Second Look*], p. 79) was delivered in 1959 as the Rede Lecture at Cambridge. Snow has professed astonishment at the wide distribution his ideas have had. He has similarly expressed his opinion as to the responses: "Many of the criticisms I respect ... a few, a very few, of the criticisms have been loaded with personal abuse to an abnormal extent..." (*A Second Look*, 1963, p. 57).

3. "There have been plenty of days when I have spent the working hours with scientists and then gone off at night with some literary colleagues" (Snow, 1963, p. 2).
4. This reflects one of the central concerns of the lecture, and ties in with one of the main themes explored in his novels as well.

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The lecture generated such an amount of controversy⁵ (some of it viciously acrimonious, as witness the response by the foremost literary critic F.R. Leavis⁶ that Snow published *A Second Look* in 1963. In the discussion of the lecture, the four parts of the lecture⁷ will be discussed more or less in the order he presented them, with his own later emendations incorporated into the discussion in each instance.

THE REDE LECTURE, 1959

“The Two Cultures begins as an objective statement of the lack of communication between scientists and literary men” (Trilling, p. 138). Snow himself starts off with the real discussion very earnestly with the statement that “I believe the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups” (Snow, 1963, p. 3). He feels that, with “literary intellectuals” at one pole and physical scientists at the other, there is a gulf of mutual incomprehension, hostility and dislike between the two. This gulf has very deeply-rooted implications, but there are disturbing inconsistencies as well. Snow, a novelist himself, seems to condemn the literary intellectuals in his advocacy of science as the most powerful revolutionary force in the world today. He feels that there is an essential difference between the scientists and the literary intellectuals. He is convinced that because science is essentially progressive, and the political views of the scientists are more tenable and workable, the scientists would possess the means — and the desire — to end want and disease in every corner of the world. This is their social concern, which would then lift them out of their being fully involved only in the “tragic condition” of mankind. “Each of us is alone: sometimes we escape from solitariness, through love or affection or perhaps creative moments, but these triumphs of life are pools of light we make for ourselves while the edge of the road is black: each of us dies alone. Some scientists I have known have had faith in revealed religion⁸. Perhaps with them the sense of the tragic condition is not so strong. I don’t know” (Snow, 1963, p. 6).

5. Trilling, 1965, p. 136.

6. Leavis, 1962, “The Significance of C.P. Snow”.

7. (1) The Two Cultures;
(2) Intellectuals as natural Luddites;
(3) The Scientific Revolution; and
(4) The Rich and the Poor.

8. Snow reveals this almost wistful attitude towards religion and the possibly consolatory influence of faith very strongly in the *Strangers and Brothers* series of novels.

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The scientists are able to “end want and disease in every corner of the world” (Davis, p. 3) even though, in Trilling’s words, they “do have certain crudities and limitations”⁹ (1965, p. 139). Snow feels ineluctably that it is in this sort of directness that the real strength and optimism of the scientists can be found: “The non-scientists have a rooted impression that the scientists are shallowly optimistic, unaware of man’s condition. On the other hand, the scientists believe that the literary intellectuals are totally lacking in foresight, peculiarly unconcerned with their brother men, in a deep sense anti-intellectual, anxious to restrict both art and thought to the existential moment” (p. 5). Strangely enough, for a man of letters, he turns against the literary men¹⁰. In one of the most-quoted parts of the essay, he refers to his having been questioned by a distinguished scientist (whom he does not identify): “Why do most writers take on social opinions which would have been thought distinctly uncivilized and démodé at the time of the Platagenets [15th and 16th centuries]? Wasn’t that true of most of the famous twentieth century writers? Yeats¹¹, Pound, Wyndham, Lewis, nine out of ten of those who have dominated literary sensibility in our time — weren’t they not only politically silly, but politically wicked? Didn’t the influence of all they represent bring Auschwitz that much nearer?” (Snow,

9. “Non-scientists think of scientists as brash and boastful. They hear Mr T.S. Eliot, who just for these illustrations we can take as an archetypal figure, saying about his attempts to revive verse-drama that we can hope for very little, but that he would feel content if he and his co-workers could prepare the ground for a new Kyd or a new Greene. That is the tone, restricted and contained, with which literary intellectuals are at home: it is the subdued voice of their culture. Then they hear a much louder voice, that of another archetypal figure, Rutherford, trumpeting: ‘This is the heroic age of science! This is the Elizabethan age!’ Many of us heard that, and a good many other statements beside which that was mild; and we weren’t left in any doubt whom Rutherford was casting for the role of Shakespeare. What is hard for the literary intellectuals to understand, imaginatively or intellectually, is that he was absolutely right. And compare ‘this is the way the world end, not with a bang but a whimper’ — incidentally one of the least likely scientific prophecies ever made — compare that with Rutherford’s famous repartee, ‘Lucky fellow, Rutherford, always on the crest of the wave’. ‘Well, I made the wave, didn’t I?’” (p. 5).
10. “If then Dr Leavis now speaks with a very special intensity in response to *The Two Cultures*, we must do him the justice of seeing that the Rede lecture denies, and in an extreme way, all that he has ever believed about literature — it is, in fact, nothing less than an indictment of literature on social and moral grounds. It represents literature as constituting a danger to the national well-being, and most especially when it is overtly a criticism of life” (Trilling, p. 138).
11. Although Snow, in his Lewis Eliot novels, would not seem to be so very far from the social preoccupations and bias expressed by Yeats in some of his poetry, such as the poem *A Prayer for my Daughter*.

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1965, p. 7). Trilling places Leavis' vituperative attack (p. 4, footnote 3) in perspective when he comments on this astonishing generalization by Snow. Snow himself somewhat weakly tries to exonerate Yeats on personal grounds, but then concedes that the facts "... are broadly true. The honest answer was that there is, in fact, a connection, which literary persons were culpably slow to see, between some kinds of early twentieth century art and the most imbecile expressions of anti-social feeling" (p. 18). To my mind one of the weaknesses of the essay lies in the fact that Snow does not then become more explicit. He does not name the artists or even the art forms, beyond vaguely suggesting that "Literature changes more slowly than science. It hasn't the same automatic corrective, and so its misguided periods are longer. But it is ill-considered of scientists to judge writers on the evidence of the period 1914-1950" (p. 8)¹². Snow maintains that the literary culture "is the traditional culture, to an extent remarkably little diminished by the emergence of the scientific one, which manages the western world" (p. 11). Snow feels that the relative imperviousness of the literary sensibility to change is really dangerous. He restates, more cautiously, what he feels in *A Second Look*: "I did not mean that literary intellectuals act as the main decisionmakers of the western world. I meant that literary intellectuals represent, vocalise and to some extent shape and predict the mood of the non-scientific culture: they do not make the decisions, but their words seep into the minds of those who do" (p. 61). The mood of the literary intellectuals, he felt, could be caught in Orwell's fantasy of the future, *1984*, which Snow feels represents the view that there is "the strongest possible wish that the future shall not exist"¹³. There is, to his mind, the most damaging aspect of the schism, the lack of communication, right here. The scientists, he feels, have "the future in their bones"¹⁴, while traditional culture wishes that the

12. Even though this was the period of T.S. Eliot, who firmly established in his work much that is admirable in the "tradition" — and was so understood by Snow, whose autobiographical alter-ego (*Lewis Eliot*) was, in the opinion of some literary critics, named for T.S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis.

13. "Indeed, it turns out that it is the future, and not the mere ignorance of each other's professional concerns, that makes the separation between the culture of science and the culture of literature" (Trilling, p. 140).

14. "They (young people of radical social and political opinion) know that, if the future is in the bones of anyone, it is in the bones of the literary genius, and exactly because the present is in his bones, exactly because the past is in his bones" (Ibid., p. 151).

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future did not exist”¹⁵.

This inhibitory influence of traditional culture on science can be criminal, Snow feels. The ideal would be, and this nobody can dispute, that “The clashing point of two subjects, two disciplines, two cultures — of two galaxies, as far as that goes — ought to produce creative chances” (p. 16). He goes further and says that science “has got to be assimilated along with, and as part and parcel of, the whole of our mental experience, and used as naturally as the rest” (p. 16) — which is, of course, not all that easily achieved in the light of the fragmented sensibility and world view of twentieth century man. Snow ascribes this, and rightly if limitedly, to “our fanatical belief in educational specialization ... and our tendency to let our social forms crystallize. This tendency appears to get stronger, not weaker, the more we iron out economic inequalities” (this is a strong leit-motiv in his novels) (p. 17). The hardening of this sort of attitude has also contributed significantly to a situation well-known in South African universities as well: “It is not only that the young scientists now feel that they are part of a culture on the rise while the other is in retreat. It is also, to be brutal, that the young scientists know that with an indifferent degree they will get a comfortable job, while their contemporaries and counterparts in English or History will be lucky to earn 60 per cent as much” (p. 18). Snow has to make this admission as to the inequity that exists, and then come to the conclusion that “there is only one way out of all this: it is, of course, by rethinking our education” (p. 18). He criticizes educational systems which have allowed this splintering process to come into effect, but can offer no real solution as to how to shake entrenched systems and attitudes. It is essential that these be shaken, however, for the industrial revolution and the scientific revolution have caught up, and should be properly handled, integrated and incorporated. He feels darkly pessimistic about England’s failure to cope with the situation and draws a chilling parallel. “I can’t help thinking of the Vatican Republic in their last half-century. Like us, they had once been fabulously lucky. They had become rich, as we did, by accident. They had acquired immense political skill, just as we have ... They knew, just as clearly as we

15. He does concede that scientists can be “illiterate specialists”, but on the other hand, “there is a moral component right in the grain of science itself, and almost all scientists form their own judgments of the moral life” (Snow, p. 3), and he finds this vastly more acceptable than the conditions of “traditional culture”: “So the great edifice of modern physics goes up, and the majority of the cleverest people in the Western world have about as much insight into it as their neolithic ancestors would have had” (p. 15).

know, that the current of history had begun to flow against them ... working out ways to keep going ... would have meant breaking the pattern into which they had crystallized ... They never found the will to break it” (p. 40). And before this situation can be rectified at home, it would be impossible to turn to the world at large to achieve anything within the sphere of what he refers to as the problem of the *Rich and the Poor*. He is insistent about the need for a changed education to cope with these crucial issues, yet he does not make any substantive proposals about education. He proposes that scientists working together could span ideological chasms, because in their scientific preoccupation they would be more likely to deal properly and objectively with issues such as finding solutions for the abject poverty and backwardness of the Third World nations¹⁶. He feels very earnestly that “the West has got to help in this transformation [from poor to richer]. The trouble is, the West with its divided culture finds it hard to grasp just how big, and above all just how fast, this transformation must be ... During all human history until this century, the rate of social change has been very slow. So slow, that it would pass unnoticed in one person’s lifetime” (p. 42)¹⁷.

He makes the further chilling (and to a South African reader very pertinent) remark that “men are no longer prepared to wait for periods longer than one person’s lifetime” (p. 43). He further astringently (and rightly) comments that “... pronouncements such as one still hears from old Asia or old Africa hands — why, it will take those people five hundred years to get up to our standard! — they are both suicidal and technically illiterate. Particularly when said, as they always seem to be said, by someone looking as though it wouldn’t take Neanderthal man five years to catch up with *him*” (p. 43). His plea is that help, technological and scientific, should be given to developing nations (“There are only two possible sources. One is the West, which means mainly the U.S., the other is the U.S.S.R.”). He rather idealistically proposes a course of action, involving tens of thousands of men and untold material resources, to industrialize, say, India. He says of such an effort that “... these men, whom we don’t yet possess, need to be trained not only in scientific but in human terms. They could not do their job if they did not

16. In the rich countries people are living longer, eating better, working less. In a poor country like India, the expectation of life is less than half what it is in England. There is some evidence that Indians and other Asians are eating less, in absolute quantities, than they were a generation ago. Life for the overwhelming majority of mankind has always been nasty, brutish and short. It is so in the poor countries still (p. 42).

17. Since then the phenomenon has had great popular note in works such as Toffler’s *Future Shock*.

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shrug off every trace of paternalism. Plenty of Europeans, from St Frances Xavier to Schweitzer, have devoted their lives to Asians and Africans, nobly but paternally. These are not the Europeans whom Asians and Africans are going to welcome now. They want men who will muck in as colleagues, who will pass on what they know, do an honest technical job, and get out. Fortunately, this is an attitude which comes easily to scientists. They are freer than most people from racial feeling; their own culture is in its human relations a democratic one" (p. 48). This is, to my mind, an incredibly naive view, leaving out of consideration almost entirely true political issues. Snow has conceded that this might be true: "People will ask me, in fact in private they have already asked me — 'This is all very fine and large. But you are supposed to be realistic man. You are interested in the fine structure of politics; you have spent some time studying how men behave in the pursuit of their own ends. Can you possibly believe that men will behave as you say they ought to? Can you imagine a political technique, in parliamentary societies like the U.S. or our own, by which any such plan could become real? Do you really believe that there is one chance in ten that any of this will happen?'

That is fair comment. I can only reply that I don't know ... I can't see the political techniques through which the good human capabilities of the West can get into action. The best one can do, and it is a poor best, is to nag away" (p. 49)¹⁸.

Snow then feels a vague and self-righteous justification about this *modus operandi* as a palliative for his disquiet, saying that "I do know this: that, if we don't do this, the Communist countries will in time ... at best then the West will have become an *enclave* in a different world — and this country will be the *enclave* of an *enclave*" (p. 50). He finds this prospect properly frightening (gone now is his conviction that the scientists can collaborate across national cultural lines) for he returns now to his initial concern, saying that "closing

18. Snow had been accused of being oblivious to politics. He finds it strange, for he maintains that "I have written, both in novels and essays, more about politics, in particular 'closed politics' (that is, the way decisions are really taken in power-groups, as contrasted with the way they are supposed to be taken), than most people of our time" (*Second Look*, p. 97). This is true — but his concern with politics has been very much with the rarefied world of Westminster, and not really with geopolitics — and this adds to the imbalance of the essay in that his way of dealing with political issues stands in the way of any really concrete proposal being possible.

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the gap between our cultures is a necessity in the most abstract intellectual sense, as well as in the most practical... For the sake of the intellectual life, for the sake of this country's special danger, for the sake of the western society living precariously rich among the poor, for the sake of the poor who needn't be poor if there is intelligence in the world, it is obligatory for us and the Americans and the whole West to look at our education with fresh eyes" (p. 50).

The sentiments all sound admirable, and Snow is to be commended for his concern with the schism between the two intellectual cultures¹⁹. Yet his concern still smacks of vague, comforting, self-consolatory humanitarian "paternalism". True, the old, purely paternalist approach in international aid-rendering has become obsolete, but so, sadly, has purely scientific and technological rendition of aid. He seems curiously muddled and naive in political terms — something which emerges from some of the novels in his uncritical dealing with, for example, Nazism through the character of Roy Calvert, whom he portrays in very sympathetic terms.

The essay makes some very sweeping generalizations. Snow has conceded its essential simplicity²⁰ and one should perhaps allow his implicit intention to speak most loudly when he says that "we can do something. The chief means open to us is education — education mainly in primary and secondary schools, but also in colleges and universities. There is no excuse for letting another generation be as vastly ignorant, or as devoid of understanding and sympathy, as we are ourselves" (p. 61). He makes this more

19. Snow's use of the term *culture* also evoked some criticism. He originally described his view in these terms: "... constantly I felt I was moving among two groups — comparable in intelligence, identical in race, not grossly different in social origin, earning about the same incomes, who had almost ceased to communicate at all, who in intellectual, moral and psychological climate had so little in common that instead of going from Burlington House or South Kensington to Chelsea, one might have crossed an ocean" (p. 2).
20. Answering to criticism about the validity of the use of the term, he responds in *A Second Look* that "for myself I believe the word is still appropriate and carries its proper meaning to sensible persons. I want to repeat what was intended to be my main message, but which has somehow got overlaid: that neither the scientific system of mental development nor the traditional is adequate for our potentialities, for the work have in front of us, for the world in which we ought to begin to live. ... The word culture has a second a technical meaning ... for me this was a very strong additional reason for selecting the word — it isn't often one gets a word which be used in two senses, both of which one explicitly intends. For scientists on the one side, literary intellectuals on the other, do in fact exist as cultures within the anthropological scope" (p. 65).

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explicit in a later statement in *Second Look* when he says that “escaping the dangers of applied science is one thing. Doing the simple and manifest good which applied science has put in our power is another, more difficult, more demanding of human qualities, and in the long run far more enriching to us all. It will need energy, self-knowledge, new skills” (p. 99).

This closer qualification might to some extent ameliorate the generalities and naiveté of the original lecture, which had prompted Trilling, a relatively sympathetic critic, to write that “I take *The Two Cultures* to be a book which is mistaken in a very large way indeed” (p. 149).

Snow himself might have the last word in the *Second Look* when he reiterates the basic, not unacceptable *idea*, unadulterated by the unsound practical applications he makes: “It is dangerous to have two cultures which can’t or don’t communicate. In a time when science is determining much of our destiny, that is, whether we live or die, it is dangerous in the most practical terms. Scientists can give bad advice and decision-makers can’t know whether it is good or bad. On the other hand, scientists in a divided culture provide a knowledge of some potentialities which is theirs alone. All this makes the political process more complex, and in some ways more dangerous, than we should be prepared to tolerate for too long, either for the purposes of avoiding disasters, or for fulfilling — what is waiting as a challenge to our conscience and goodwill — a definable social hope” (p. 98).

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