

Two Cultures and the British Education System

by Antony Flew

When, on its first publication in 1959, I first read Charles Snow's Rede Lecture I was Head of the Department of Philosophy in the University College of North Staffordshire (UCNS).⁽¹⁾ This institution had been founded in 1950 both as a reaction against the specialized narrowness of most existing courses in British universities and as an attempt to bridge the gulf between what Snow was later to distinguish as "The Two Cultures." For at least the first two or three decades from its foundation UCNS was, therefore, more like such US Liberal Arts Colleges as Swarthmore and Oberlin than it was like anything in the UK.

Like all my English colleagues in the faculty of what has since become the University of Keele I had previously been educated at an English secondary school ⁽²⁾ in which there was a sharp separation between studies and students on the Classical or Arts "side" and those on the Modern or Science "side," although some subjects — such as Mathematics, French and History — were in fact studied on both "sides." At the age, normally, of sixteen all pupils in such schools took a School Certificate examination covering all the subjects previously taught to them on their chosen "side."

After that they either left school or, if they were hoping to proceed to university, they concentrated for the next two or at most three years on not more than three of the subjects which they had previously been studying on their "side," one or at most two of which they would expect to pursue further at university. Anyone attending such a school who wanted ever to do any science had to start on the Modern or Science "side" at, typically, the age of twelve; and no one who had been on one "side" at secondary school expected if they went on to

University to be required to do any work on any subject peculiar to the other "side."

These were for Snow the English "educational and social idiosyncrasies" which led to a "slight exaggeration here" ⁽³⁾ of what he saw as the deep and wide gulf which is to be found everywhere between the two cultures. Thanks to my own earlier experience of that "intense specialization, like nothing else on earth" ⁽⁴⁾ and to my later involvement in an attempt to bridge it, I was strongly sympathetic with Snow's emphasis on the importance of this gulf. I was also in agreement with this diagnosis of "the three menaces" then facing humanity, "H-bomb war, over-population, the gap between rich and poor."⁽⁵⁾ (My own concern, however, was, as it still is, not with inequalities between the tax-maintained worst-off and the very rich in the First World but with Third World, hardship — causing poverty.)

Snow went on to say that "Whatever else in the world we know survives to the year 2,000, that won't. Once the trick of getting rich is known, as it now is, the world can't survive half rich and half poor. It's just not on."⁽⁶⁾ According to Snow the trick was both to provide abundant capital to Third World countries in order to finance the establishment of industries and to lend them scientists and technologists to start things off. They would then pass their knowledge on so that Third World people became able to run these industries themselves. Snow went on to say that the amount of capital needed could only be provided by a combined operation of the governments of the USSR, the USA and the other Western industrial countries. For, as he significantly concluded, "Private industry, even the biggest private industry, can't touch it, and in no sense is it a fair business risk."⁽⁷⁾

Well, the year 2,000, is now nearly upon us and, whatever dispute there might be about the relative numbers of people enjoying comparative riches in the First World and those in the Third World (and now in the former USSR) suffering hardship — causing poverty, there can be no doubt but that the numbers of such

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desperately poor people are absolutely enormous, and hence that Snow's optimistic prediction has been decisively falsified. Indeed, thanks to the persistent failure to check or even to attempt to check population increases, populations in many Third World countries are still growing at rates faster than their rates of economic growth, if any. And this failure has at least in some part to be attributed to a refusal to accept the perceived behavioral costs of employing available technology.)

What Snow in 1959 believed to be the sovereign remedy for Third World

poverty has in fact been extensively applied in the years between, even if not so extensively as he himself suggested would be necessary. But although this compulsory generosity of First World taxpayers has made several Third World dictators very rich indeed, enabling them to stash away billions in their numbered Swiss bank accounts, it has done little if anything to relieve the poverty of their peoples. On the other hand, when multinational corporations — to the fury of all properly left-thinking people have been allowed to make profits out of investments in the Third World, the operations of these corporations have, however unintentionally, and always providing that the benefits were not monopolized by kleptocratic Third World politicians, actually benefitted Third World peoples.(7)

But, though Snow was mistaken in thinking that he knew what the sovereign remedy for Third World poverty was, he was not mistaken in his beliefs both that there is such a remedy and that it cannot take effect unless the growth of population is drastically limited. The discovery of this remedy was made and published over two centuries ago. It was made by a worker not in the natural but in the social or, as he himself would have said, the moral sciences. His name was Adam Smith, and the work in which he published his finding was entitled *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. That finding was that the one essential was efficient but very strictly limited and therefore cheap government. As he himself expressed it, in the proverbial nutshell: "Little else is requisite to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism, but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice; all the rest being brought about by the natural course of things."(9)

At one point Snow writes; "If the scientists have the future in their bones, then the traditional culture responds

by wishing the future did not exist."(10) He adds to this statement an illustrative footnote: "Compare George Orwell's 1984, which is the strongest possible wish that the future should not exist, with J.D. Bernal's World Without War.(11) Need one say more about this unfortunate but surely significant illustration than that Snow certainly knew that Bernal had throughout his adult life been a member of the Communist Party, and remained unreconstructed until his death. If only all members of the literary culture had shared Orwell's realistic appreciation of the nature of Soviet socialist reality, then the Cold War might have been won much more easily and perhaps more quickly than it was.

In his Introduction, Stefan Collini says that "Physics had long been seen, as it effectively was by Snow, as the hardest of the 'hard sciences,' a kind of gold standard against which weaker or debased forms of science could be measured... This was certainly Rutherford's opinion. For it was he who famously said: "In science there is only physics — and stamp collecting." I cannot testify that I ever myself ever heard him say this. But in the Cambridge of my boyhood I certainly heard this saying attributed to him by people who were very familiar with his opinions.

NOTES

- (1) The University College was later transformed into what it now is, the University of Keele.
- (2) Approximately equivalent to a high school in the U.S.
- (3) Charles Snow The Two Cultures, with an Introduction by Stefan Collini (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.3.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p.19
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p.46. This allegedly known "trick of getting rich" is, of course, a matter of policy for countries rather than individuals.

(7) Ibid., p. 47.

(8) See for an abundance of evidence on these matters such works of P.T. Bauer as: Dissent on Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); Equality, the Third World and Economic Delusion (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981); Reality and Rhetoric: Studies in Economic Development (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984); and The Development Frontier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

(9) For essays on the disasters produced in the second half of the present century as the result of accepting the advice of professing development economists who did not recognise and follow Smith as the founder of that discipline see, for example, Peter J. Boettke (ed.) The Collapse of Development Planning (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994). It is perhaps worth remarking, if only in a footnote, that Snow himself, as a junior Minister in an (Old) Labour administration, as well as three of the distinguished natural scientists whom he mentions, namely J. D. Bernal, J. B. S. Haldane and P. M. S. Blackett (who were card-carrying members or constant fellow travellers of the UK Communist Party) were at one in their enthusiastic commitment to the supposed virtues of central economic planning. None of them had ever recognized the genius of Ludwig von Mises, or in all probability ever heard of him.

(10) The Two Cultures, p.11.

(11) Ibid., p.101.

(12) Ibid., p.6.