



Are Separate Cultures Worth Preserving?

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I THINK MOST people would agree that the type of culture in any society is a subject of some importance. Human improvement must be self-improvement but as it must occur within a social environment and culture forms part of that environment, the quality of culture might promote or check or even reverse genuine progress.

At the same time culture is not the only influence on environment. The laws, institutions and economic system all contribute to the overall effect; and as all these things overlap and react on each other it is incorrect to regard culture as existing in isolation.

Although culture is not a science I think we should apply the scientific method to its investigation; we should try to distinguish the universal from the accidental, and we should try to define our terms.

To define any particular culture is not easy, as art, poetry, literature, etc. are only manifestations of the mind and spirit of the people in general.

I suggest for our present purpose we define a culture as "that combination of generally-accepted traditions and forms of art and literature which distinguishes one society from other societies."

There can be rich and poor cultures, elating and debasing cultures, but as they are all intangible things, any attempt by public bodies, however well meant, to manufacture a culture must fail.

An example is the BBC. Writ large, but in Latin, in the entrance hall of Broadcasting House is the following: "This temple of the arts and muses is dedicated to Almighty God by the first governors of Broadcasting. It is their prayer that all things hostile to peace and purity may be banished from this House, and that the people, inclining their ears to whatsoever things are beautiful and honest and of good report, may tread the paths of wisdom and uprightness."

Some items, on the television especially, forty years afterwards might suggest that the present Governors do not understand Latin.

As any national culture is a part of a wider civilisation and as people live in national states, we must consider how nationalism and patriotism affect a culture.

The tendency of nationalism is to unite one collection of people in hostility rather than in goodwill towards another collection. It irons out individual deviations within the nation. It is therefore collectivist in spirit, and Hitler was quite correct in calling his movement National Socialism. As hatred debases human nature, nationalism

therefore conflicts with a high type of culture.

Patriotism, though seldom mentioned in Britain today, I regard differently. At its best it is enlightened public spirit, consideration for the rights and interests of all one's fellow countrymen as against the pressure of selfish groups. The true patriot strives to make his country the leader in civilisation, not by force but by example. Such a spirit must have an impact on culture; so I think patriotism, properly understood, promotes a high type of culture.

The situation of Welsh culture to-day illustrates the difference between nationalism and patriotism, as I understand that word.

I live in a Welsh-speaking district and many of my friends use Welsh as their first language. They are proud of their culture although they are as good British citizens as Englishmen are; and they regard the antics of the Welsh Nationalists as an affront to the dignity of Wales.

The difficulty is, however, that the Nationalists get all the publicity and, as they denounce Welsh non-Nationalists as traitors and people don't like to face public abuse, the voice of reason is seldom heard.

As a consequence of this, some valuable elements in Welsh culture tend to become fenced off from British culture as a whole. What I especially admire in Welsh culture are those periodic gatherings for non-professional contests in poetry and music and song called Eisteddfodau. Here is tradition, dignity and colour, such a relief from this brash technological world. It would be an advantage if this custom could be extended to England but the exclusive spirit of Nationalism is against it.

To abolish separate or regional cultures leads to uniformity. To leave them free leads to variety. In order to



assess the ultimate effects of these alternatives on human affairs, I think we should extend our survey in time and space. We should consult history, which is the laboratory of social experiment, remembering that the results of

such experiments often require many generations to reveal themselves.

So I propose to review an historical example of each of these alternatives, and then an example of the present time.

The most uniform culture I've ever read about is the Inca civilisation of South America.

When first discovered by the Spaniards the people had for some 500 years enjoyed the most perfect planned economy and welfare state on record; and in technology they were well in advance of Europe at that time. The Inca rulers were remarkable statisticians and this enabled them to plan and control every thing down to minor details from the capital at Cuzco.

The Incas were logical about the planned economy. They realised that it required planned consumption as well as production and trade, and that the minds of the labour-units must also be conditioned to conform.

So everybody was in effect placed on rations and educated through a State religion to regard obedience to the experts as paramount and work as an end in itself. Full employment was assured and idleness punished.

Moreover the Incas were good psychologists. They knew that if people are protected from all need to exercise personal initiative life becomes so dull that artificial excitement must be provided. So the equivalent of a Ministry of Leisure and Culture appointed periodical festivals at which suitable amusements were organised, followed by free drink and orgies. So planned permissiveness served the over-all plan.

The downfall of the Inca empire illustrates the effects of paralysis of personal initiative. When Pizarro in 1531 landed with 180 Spanish ruffians it happened to coincide with the palace revolution in Cuzco, so that the bureaucrats were temporarily disorganized and the local authorities had no orders. Pizarro marched almost unopposed to Cuzco, seized the Whitehall of the set-up and soon 12 million mental serfs were at his mercy. But even those ruffians were shocked at the ultimate effect of welfarism. If one family was completely helpless through sickness their neighbours paid no attention; it was the business of the welfare officer, not their's.



Under the Incas the people attained high skill in some handicrafts and decorated the vast public buildings with statuary, uniform in character, impressive by its massiveness but lacking all grace, elegance and spirit.

Louis Baudin, the modern French historian on the

Incas, points out that there is every indication to show that the people were contented under this protective and uniform regime and the effects are still apparent in the



comparative mental inertia, apathy and submissiveness of their descendants.

This example does not suggest that to aim at uniformity of culture leads to human improvement. I think its only lesson for posterity is to show us what we should avoid.

For an example of a free or diverse culture I turn to more familiar ground, although our educational experts, responding to the snobbery of anti-snobbery, have made it less familiar than before.

Ancient Greece, about 450 B.C., consisted of some forty little states, fiercely independent of each other and differing in size, resources and systems of government.

They were united by a common language and a form of religion which, whatever its defects, did not foster an organised priesthood or lend itself to political manipulation.

Perhaps for this reason they shared to some degree a common attitude to education.

To-day education is generally regarded as a matter for the State and its experts; and State education must always tend towards conditioning human material to conform to some kind of plan.

The Athenians looked after technical instruction in a natural way but they did not consider it part of true education. Under a law of Solon it was made the duty of every father to teach his children a trade. If he fulfilled this duty he would have a legal right in old age to call on his children to support him. If he neglected his duty he would have no legal right.

On the other hand the Greeks would have been surprised at any kind of education which did not emphasise logic, or training in clear thinking. Greek education was, in fact, a deliberate attempt to draw forth all the individual's powers, mental, spiritual and cultural. It thus created an atmosphere of intellectual freedom which it is difficult for us to conceive to-day, living in an age of humbug. Greek speakers expressed themselves with a frankness that almost shocks us. They were intellectually self-reliant and this was reflected in the general tone of society.

Pericles, chief magistrate of Athens, on a famous occasion summed up the character of his countrymen: "Happiness is freedom, freedom is courage. We trust less to system and policy than to the native spirit of our citi-

zens. We do not copy others but seek to be the school of Hellas. The world cannot produce a man who, when he has only himself to depend on, is equal to so many emergencies as the citizens of Athens."

It is hardly necessary for me to quote Greek achievements in all spheres of culture. But I would point out that they never adulated bigness. Instead they aimed at perfection.

In architecture, for example, says the Encyclopaedia Britannica: "As no nation has equalled the Egyptians in the magnitude of their buildings, so the Greeks have never been surpassed in the exquisite beauty of form and proportion and the extreme simplicity and harmony which pervade every part of their structures."

But I would add that their architecture was not uniform. The Doric, Ionic and Corinthian styles are all different though all unmistakably Greek.

And has this diversity of culture transmitted anything of value to posterity?

Lowes Dickinson, in his standard book, *The Greek Way of Life*, says: "From Athens at its greatest there has streamed, upon ages less illustrious, an influence at once the sanest and most inspired of all that have shaped the secular history of the world." Sir Richard Livingstone, in his *Education for a World Adrift*, says "Our civilisation was born in Greece . . . A man may know nothing of Greek thought and literature . . . but Greece, Rome and Christianity have made Western Civilisation and touch its members at every moment in their lives."

So I come to a modern example of a diverse culture, and, significantly, in one of the smallest and least centralised of European countries: a country which does not beg to join the EEC and is not even a member of that association of bickering politicians called the United Nations.

The Swiss Confederation consists of twenty-five self-governing cantons, the powers of the central government are strictly limited, and all major questions, both in the Federation and the Cantons, must be put to a referendum of the citizens.

The population is drawn from three different races and four different languages are officially recognised. Thus three different cultures, each extending far beyond the Swiss frontiers, flourish freely side by side.

And has this diversity weakened the patriotism of the Swiss people, or their confidence in themselves?

During the last war Switzerland was completely enclosed within the might of the Axis powers and utterly exposed to their propaganda, threats and efforts to organise a Fifth Column. Yet no Quisling was to be found.

So I conclude that in the United Kingdom we are fortunate in having four distinct though related cultures, all contributing to enrich British culture as a whole. We should do nothing either to suppress them or to debase them with privileges and subsidies.

Think what we should lose if all the traditional songs,

dances and customs of Scotland, Wales and Ireland were to be abolished.

At Llangollen some years back I heard a massed Welsh



choir singing their national song, Hen Wlad fy Nhaddau. The response of the audience, drawn from many different nationals, is something I shall always remember.

But don't forget—if you sang that song in France, the boss country of the EEC, you would get run in! There is a Nationalist movement in Brittany, the Breton language is similar to Welsh and the Breton Nationalists have adopted the Welsh national song. Ever since the Great Revolution, when Federalism was made a capital crime, French governments have sought to suppress regional differences. So the singing in public of that song is an offence against the law.

I don't think Nationalist parties and demonstrations really originate in cultural differences; they are only one of the many forms of crude protest against the unnatural perversions of a monopolist society. If we could only abolish fundamental injustice, so that people could be really free, I think they would find life too interesting an adventure to be wasted on hunting scapegoats.

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