

Was William Morris a 'Natural Luddite'?

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In the Rede Lecture, delivered at the University of Cambridge in 1959, C. P. Snow presented his well-known distinction between the 'culture' of scientists and the 'culture' of literary intellectuals. 'The non-scientists', Snow said, '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 man, in a deep sense anti-intellectual, anxious to restrict both art and thought to the existential movement'.¹ Snow also made various predictions that are, in retrospect, fascinating, for example, '... whatever else in the world we know survives to the year 2000, [the disparity between the rich and poor countries] won't'.² Snow argued that capital and trained scientists and engineers from the developed world were needed to close the gap between rich and poor countries. The gap between the two cultures prevented the West from providing scientists and engineers who would assist with the industrialisation of the poor countries. The two cultures were not so widely separated in the industrialised Communist countries, so they were better equipped to provide trained personnel to assist the Third World. Snow went on to say, 'I do know this: that if we don't do it [that is, assist the Third World with industrial development], the Communist countries will in time'.³ It is argued here that William Morris's analysis of the role of science and technology in the context of capitalist relations of production explains not only why Snow's prediction of Third World development failed to materialise, but why the gap between the two cultures persists.

In retrospect, it seems surprising that Snow later claimed his Rede Lecture was not related to the politics of the Cold War.⁴ After all, his primary message seemed to be that if the gap between the two cultures in the West was not closed, then the West would lose the Cold War in the Third World to the Communists.

Snow suggested that Asians and Africans would reject Schweitzer-style paternalism. He said, '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. In their own internal climate, the breeze of equality of man hits you in the face . . .'⁵ Could Snow, who lauded pedagogical experimentation in U.S. higher education,⁶ not have known of the colour bar which pervaded U.S. science and higher education in 1959, or of the absence of people of African and Indian descent, not to mention women, in British academic and scientific circles?

It can, of course, be objected that the foregoing criticisms are unfair because hindsight is always perfect. Nevertheless, the gap between the two cultures still

exists, so it is interesting to look at Snow's comments on its origins and persistence. He said, 'If we forget the scientific culture, then the rest of western intellectuals have never tried, wanted, or been able to understand the industrial revolution, much less accept it. Intellectuals in particular literary intellectuals, are natural Luddites'.⁷ William Morris, Snow argued, fell into this camp. He said, 'Ruskin . . . and William Morris and Thoreau and Emerson and Lawrence tried various kinds of [anti-industrial] fantasies which were in effect no more than screams of horror'.⁸ Although Snow characterised this claim as a 'correlation' rather than an explanation, it still seems superficial. Scholars have long been aware that the cultural gap between science and the arts/humanities can be traced to the revival of classical knowledge. In medieval times, Plato and Aristotle's works were reinterpreted as foundations for various theological schools. With the rise of humanism during the Renaissance, the writers of ancient Greece and Rome were widely regarded as models of civic virtue which could be emulated by contemporary rulers.⁹ As well, knowledge of classical languages distinguished an educated male elite from the vernacular of the masses, a distinction which persisted well into the twentieth century. (Indeed, this distinction pervaded the academic culture of Snow's time). However, seminal figures of Western science, such as Bacon, Galileo, and Newton, realised that the work of classical scholars such as Plato and Aristotle could not provide a foundation for the scientific enterprise. The rejection of classical scholarship as a basis for science eventually distinguished 'natural philosophers' from scholars engaged in a quest for the 'essences' of truth, beauty, and virtue in the works of ancient Greek and Roman poets, philosophers, and statesmen.

Many scholars recognised that abandoning classical thought as a basis for experimental science was justified. At the same time, others concluded that the quest for virtue in the works of classical authors and elsewhere, was still worthwhile. This disjunction may mark the origin of the gap between the two cultures. Scientists, it sometimes seemed, had abandoned classical works not only as a basis for science, but as signposts on a quest for virtue and morality. In the absence of such a quest, scientists could become mere instruments who could be used for poor or ill. This seems to be at the heart of Morris's critique of Victorian science and industry. In his 1878 lecture on 'The Lesser Arts', Morris said:

And Science – we have loved her well, and followed her diligently, what will she do [to remediate environmental degradation]? I fear she is so much in the pay of the counting-house, the counting-house and the drill sergeant, that she is too busy, and will for the present do nothing. Yet there are matters which I should have thought easy for her; say for example teaching Manchester how to consume its own smoke, or Leeds how to get rid of its superfluous black dye without turning it into the river, which would be as much worth her attention as the heaviest of heavy black silks, or the biggest of useless guns.¹⁰

Morris's remarks go far to explain the gap between the two cultures. The use of science as a means to an end, irrespective of the morality of the end in question, has brought us nuclear weapons and waste, toxic pollution, stratospheric ozone depletion, genetically modified foods, and global climate change. In light of this

record, it is not surprising that many scientists are widely regarded by many literary intellectuals as white-coated cretins who prostitute themselves to capitalism and militarism for prestige or money. This is, of course, an over-generalisation. There are many principled scientists who warn of the dangers of global climate change and other problems related to developments in science and technology. But there are also armies of scientists who remain silent on these issues, or who blithely continue to work for military establishments or for fossil fuel and related industries.¹¹

It should also be noted that literary intellectuals do not have a monopoly on morality and virtue. Snow correctly characterised T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence as political reactionaries.¹² Why, then, did Snow lump them together with Morris, who is now recognised as one of the founders of Eco-Communism? To classify Morris with Eliot and Lawrence is like saying that the [socialist] politics of Albert Einstein and the [racist] politics of William Shockley must have been similar because they were both scientists.

Snow suggested that literary intellectuals did not understand the potential of the industrial revolution for bringing material improvements to the lives of poor and working people. He believed this lack of understanding indicated insensitivity to poverty and suffering, and he lamented the failure of writers, with the exception of Ibsen, to 'see at once the hideous back-street, the smoking chimneys, the internal price – and also the prospects of life that were opening out for the poor'.¹³ This hardly applies to Morris, who, in his 1888 essay, 'How We Live and How We Might Live', wrote: 'if . . . necessary reasonable work be of a mechanical kind, I must be helped to do it by a machine, not to cheapen my labour, but so that as little time as possible may be spent upon it, and that I may be able to think of other things while I am tending the machine'.¹⁴ This is hardly the conclusion of a 'natural Luddite'.

Perhaps Snow was unfamiliar with the foregoing passage from Morris. But he was surely familiar with the works of other prominent writers who had explored the moral implications of the uses to which science and technology could be put. These writers include Mary Shelley, H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, Robert Louis Stevenson, and the writer/playwright apparently favoured by Snow, Henrik Ibsen. Snow evidently failed to appreciate the relevance of these works to the gap between the two cultures. It is less likely that Snow knew of similar works by central and eastern European writers such as August Bebel and Alexander Bogdanov.

Snow's prediction that the gap between rich and poor nations would be closed by the year 2000 failed, partly because, as Morris suggested, science was harnessed to profit, not to Third World development or environmental remediation. The continued subordination of science to capitalism and militarism ensures that at least some literary intellectuals, and perhaps many non-intellectuals, will continue to regard most scientists as morally myopic and incapable of seeing the social and political implications of their work. There is no indication that the gap between the two cultures, or the gap between rich and poor nations, will close soon.

NOTES

- ¹ C. P. Snow, *Two Cultures: And A Second Look*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1963), p. 5.
- ² *ibid.*, p. 42.
- ³ *ibid.*, p. 50.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, p. 97.
- ⁵ *ibid.*, p. 48.
- ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 69.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 22.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 25.
- ⁹ This was pointed out to me by Natasha G. Bartels. See H. Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 1966); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 1975); Quentin Skinner, *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1978), vol. I.
- ¹⁰ Asa Briggs (ed.), *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1962), p. 85.
- ¹¹ See Fred Pearce, 'Bought and Paid For', *The Guardian Weekly*, 8-14 June 2000, p. 22.
- ¹² *Two Cultures: And A Second Look*, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.
- ¹³ *ibid.*, p. 25.
- ¹⁴ *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, *op. cit.*, p. 174.