

CULTURE WARS

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The crisis of the notion of culture is today evident in the conflict between universalism and particularism, between notions concerning the normative-aesthetic and the anthropological-descriptive. The author outlines the historical reasons which, in the post-modern era, have led to a conflict between western universalism and other cultures of the world, and to the complex relations between cultural industry, post-modernist relativity, the political functionalisation of high culture and the plurality of the politics of identity. He advocates the revalorisation of a radical extensiveness of the universalistic idea of culture of the Enlightenment.

Vojne kultur. *Kriza ideje kulture se danes kaže v konfliktu med univerzalizmom in partikularizmom, med normativno-estetskimi in antropološkopisnimi pojmovanji. Avtor oriše zgodovinske razloge, ki so v postmoderini privedli do spopada med zahodnim univerzalizmom in kulturami ostalega sveta ter do zapletenih razmerij med kulturno industrijo, postmodernističnim relativizmom, politično funkcionalizacijo visoke Kulture in pluralizmom identitetnih politik. Zavzema se za revalorizacijo radikalnih razsežnosti univerzalistične ideje kulture v razsvetljenstvu.*

The word 'culture' has always seemed both too broad and too narrow to be really useful. Its aesthetic meaning includes Stravinsky but not necessarily science fiction; its anthropological sense may stretch from hairstyles and drinking habits to the manufacture of drainpipes. In its turbulent career as a concept, culture has been both a synonym and an antonym of 'civilisation', has pivoted between actual and ideal, and hovered precariously between the descriptive and the normative. In its narrower sense, the word means the arts and fine living: the arts define what makes life worth living, but they are not themselves what we live for. It suggests rather patronisingly that science, philosophy, politics and economics can no longer be regarded as 'creative' (for what historical reasons is this so?), and implies rather alarmingly that civilised values are now to be found only in fantasy.

Culture in this Schillerian or Arnoldian sense is an antidote to sectarianism, keeping the mind serenely untainted by one-sided commitments and plucking a universal humanity from our squalid, empirical, everyday selves. Yet since this blithe Hellenism sets its face against specific practical interests, it can realise itself in action only at the cost of betraying itself. The action necessary to secure it undermines its own harmonious symmetry. But you can still strive to link this sense of culture to others, in a three-step process: culture as aesthetic defines a quality of life (culture as civility) which it is the task of politics to realise culture as a whole (culture as corporate form of life).

Six historic developments in modernity put the notion of culture on to agenda. First, culture drifts to the fore the moment 'civilisation' itself begins to seem self-contradictory. It is at this point that a dialectical thought becomes necessary. Once the idea of civilisation, in post-Enlightenment Europe, becomes more of a drably factual term than an upliftingly normative one, culture begins to counter it as utopian critique. Second, culture springs into prominence once it is realised that without radical social change (culture in that sense), the future of the arts and fine living (culture in that other sense) is in dire jeopardy. For culture to survive, you have to change the culture. Third, with Herder and German idealism, culture in the sense of a distinctive, traditional, perhaps ethnic way of life provides a convenient way of belabouring Enlightenment universalism.

Fourth, culture starts to matter once Western imperialism is faced with the conundrum of alien life-forms which *must* be inferior but which seem in reasonably good shape. Culture, like Raymond Williams's masses, is, in short, other people. The Victorians didn't see themselves as a culture, since the relativising, self-estranging effect of this move would have been too damaging. In the era of imperialism, then, the West is confronted with the spectre of cultural relativism at the precise moment at which it needs to affirm its own spiritual privilege.

The other two reasons for the prominence of the idea of culture belong more to our own era. First, need one say, the culture industry: that historic moment in which cultural or symbolic production, separated from other forms of production in the great epoch of modernity, is finally reintegrated with them to become part of general commodity production as such. Second, in the past few decades, the fact that for the three currents which have dominated the global political agenda – feminism, revolutionary nationalism and ethnicity – culture in the broad sense of identity, value, sign, language, life-style, shared history, belonging or solidarity, is the very language in which one articulates one's political demands, not an agreeable bonus. This is true of identity politics as it is not so much, of say, industrial class struggle or the politics of famine.

And this, from the viewpoint of a classical conception of culture, is a dramatic, indeed momentous development. For the whole point of culture, classically speaking, was that it was the terrain on which we could for a blessed moment of transcendence, put in suspension all our quirky idiosyncrasies of region, gender, status, profession, ethnicity and the like, and meet instead on the common ground of the fundamentally human. If

culture in the more narrow, aesthetic sense mattered, it was because it provided a way of lugging these human values around with us in conveniently portable form, as well as fleshing them out as sensuous experience. To this extent, culture was part of the solution; but what has happened over the past few decades – one major reason why the notion has been plunged into spectacular crisis – is that it has veered on its axis from being part of the solution to being part of the problem. Culture no longer means a terrain of consensus but an arena of contention. For post-modernism, culture means not the transcendence of identity but the affirmation of one.

Of course in one sense, culture and crisis go together like Laurel and Hardy. Culture and crisis were born at a stroke. The very notion of culture is a strategic response to historical crisis. But for us, here and now, that crisis has assumed a distinctive form, which one might summarise as the opposition between Culture and culture. Culture (in the sense of universal civility) is itself cultureless, is indeed in a sense the enemy of culture in this lower-case sense. It denotes not a particular way of life, but those values which ought to inform any way of life whatsoever. Or rather, Culture is at once culture-bound (roughly, speaking, part of Western modernity) and the very implicit standard by which particular cultures can be identified and evaluated in the first place. It is, then, in an exact philosophical sense, transcendental – the very conditions of possibility of a culture as such – while nevertheless taking on flesh and blood in a particular way of life, rather as God had to incarnate himself *somewhere*, and for some mysterious reason chose first-century Palestine to do so.

One can think of Culture, perhaps, in terms of the Romantic imagination. The imagination is not bound by a specific time and place: it just is that infinite capacity for universal sympathy which allows us to penetrate the spirit of any specific time, place, object or identity whatsoever. It is thus, rather like the Almighty for whom it is a secular substitute, both everything and nothing. This protean, quicksilver force has no identity of its own: its identity consists simply in the sympathetic capacity to assume other people's identities, indeed to know them better than they know themselves. It occupies all identities from within, yet precisely by doing so, transcends any one of them, since no one of them can rival this power. Cultures (in the lower case sense) know themselves, whereas what Culture knows is them. And the affinity of this benign power to the more liberal forms of imperialism need not, I imagine, be laboured. Culture is not a particular way of life but the custodian of cultures; and so, stateless and timeless that it is, it assumes the right to intervene into such cultures in the name of Culture, which is to say, ultimately, in the name of their own good.

Cultures are uncultured, at least from the standpoint of Culture:, because they are blatantly, sometimes militantly particular, resonant of nothing but themselves, and without such difference would simply disappear. What they do, from Culture's somewhat disdainful standpoint, is seize perversely upon particularity in the sense of historical contingency – upon pure accidents (in the scholastic sense) of place, provenance, sex,

occupation, skin-colour and the like – and elevate these, which are not for Hegel ‘In the Idea’, to universal status. Culture, for its part, is concerned not with the contingently particular but with that very different animal, the essentially individual; and its aim is to set up a direct circuit between individual and universal, by-passing the sordidly empirical *en route*. Indeed what could be more uniquely individual, more wholly self referential and *sui generis*, than the universe itself?

Now the momentous event of our own time is that this war of versions of culture is not, for good or ill, merely a clash between those tedious old fogies in the English department who still study line-endings in Milton, and those bright young things down the corridor who write books on masturbation. Would in a sense that it were! Would in a way that culture were indeed, as the vulgar leftists claim, remote from everyday life. In Bosnia or Belfast or the Basque country, however, culture isn’t just what you put in the CD player or gaze at in the gallery: culture is what you kill for. The conflict between Culture and cultures has now become mapped upon a geopolitical axis, between the West and the rest, so that what Western Culture in the sense of universal subjectivity and civility confronts is culture in the sense of nationalism, regionalism, nativism, corporatism, communitarianism, family values, religious fundamentalism, ethnic solidarity, new Ageism and the like – corporate forms of culture which lay siege to it both within and without the gates. This is, not, need one say, just a combat between north and south of the globe – partly because some of the enemies are also within, partly because, say, Islamic liberalism sets its face against Texas fundamentalism, or Indian socialism contests European racism. In any case, nothing is more claustrophobically corporate than the brave new global world of the transnational corporations, which can be quite as closed and homogenised as the most parochial of tribes or incestuously intimate of Southern Baptist neighbourhoods.

Even so, the geopolitical axis is now pretty obvious – or, if you prefer, the stalled dialectic between these alternative meanings of culture, which increasingly paint each other into a corner. The more emptily formalistic universality becomes – the more it becomes synonymous with capitalist globalisation – the more ingrown and pathological become the cultural defences against it. The more the liberal humanists falsely celebrate William Blake as the voice of the eternally human, the more they ditch him in California as a Dead White Male. For every European liberal, a neo-Nazi thug; for every jet-setting corporate executive for whom anyone who might be a customer is human, a local patriot for whom humanity exists strictly on this side of the mountains. A vacuous globalism confronts a militant particularism, as the torn halves of a freedom to which they do not add up.

But our culture wars are in fact three-cornered, not a simple polarity. There is, to begin with, high or minority culture, or better what Fredric Jameson has called ‘NATO high culture’. This version of culture is, so to speak, the spiritual wing of the EU, and must increasingly betray its own serene, harmonious, disinterested symmetry by unilateral military opera-

tions which succeed only in unmasking the very spiritual universalism they are intended to prop up. As the West continues to define itself as the wronged Goliath squaring bravely up to the bullying Davids, we are likely to witness more of this self subversion, in which liberal universalism redefines its slogan 'Nothing human is alien to me' as: 'Even the most obscure backwater can threaten our profits'.

The outlook for the West here, however, is not exactly sanguine, since part of what we are living through, in the period after the classical nation-state, is a skewing of cultural and political forms, or if you like a failure (so far, anyway) of new transnational political forms to achieve their essential cultural correlatives. Not many people are ready quite yet to throw themselves on the barricades with a defiant shout of 'Long Live the European Community!' Politics needs people's cultural or psychic investments if it is to thrive, but the contradiction here is that culture is a less abstract affair than politics, a matter of what we live on the body and in the gut and on the pulses, and with our kinsfolk, and so always potentially askew to the necessarily universal forms of the state, not to speak of the transnational. Indeed it was the hyphen in the phrase 'nation-state' which for a triumphant moment of modernity secured the link between culture and politics, people and government, local and universal, kinship and polis, ethnic and civic; and another reason why the notion of culture is in big trouble is because the nation-state is too. The nation-state was in its day a marvellously resourceful way of linking individual and universal, sensuous particularity and formal abstraction, as indeed was that other great invention of modernity, the work of art. I mean the work of art as reconstituted from the ground up by what we know as aesthetics, for which the artwork was important because it figured forth a whole revolutionary new kind of totality, a new relationship between particular and whole, one in which the law of the whole was no more than the articulation of its sensuous particulars.

This minority meaning of Culture, then, survives; but in today's world it enters into strange contradictions with two other versions of culture. First, culture as corporate particularity, or identity politics, as the old 'exotic' anthropological meaning is now refurbished and begins to spawn wildly to include gun culture, deaf culture, beach culture, police culture, gay culture, Zulu culture, Microsoft culture and the like: a universe of sensuous particulars which unlike the classical work of art tends to deny the universal altogether. Thirdly, there is of course mass, commercial or market-driven culture, these last two versions taken together comprising, I suppose, what we know as postmodern culture. One might summarise the trio, far too glibly, as excellence, ethnos and economics. Or one might plot them along an alternative axis, that of universalism, parochialism and cosmopolitanism.

But just look at some of their curious interactions. For example, the more the postmodern market culture of the West penetrates the globe (and there is now an institute for postmodern studies in Beijing), the more the West needs to find some sort of spiritual legitimacy for this somewhat overweening global operation. But the more market forces proliferate, the

more a sceptical, relativist, provisional, anti-foundational postmodern culture within the West undermines the very forms of stable, solid values which market culture needs to draw upon for its orderly framework, and which the West needs to appeal to for its spiritual authority. One can't, in other words, easily take the Nietzschean way out here, which is just to ditch the superstructural authority ('God is dead') and celebrate the provisionality. Or rather, it is easier to recommend this if you are running a humanities department rather than a state. Neo-pragmatist dorns of justification of a Rortyan kind – 'this is, just what we white liberal Western bourgeois do, take it or leave it' – are both too ideologically feeble and too politically laid-back for a West which is not only now claiming an overreaching global authority for itself, but which is faced by enemies elsewhere which have much stronger, more foundational forms of cultural legitimisation such as Islam. At the same time, however, Western capitalism itself creates the kind of jaded, sceptical, post-metaphysical ambience which gives a distinctly hollow, implausible ring to the kind of high-rhetorical foundational appeals – the Destiny of the West, the triumph of Reason, the Will of God, the White Man's Burden – which served the bourgeoisie supremely well in their time.

In fact, if one wanted yet another reason for the crisis of culture in the West, one might do worse than answer: the failure of religion. I must remind myself here of course that the United States has more churches than hamburger joints – that the most materialist nation is a rampantly *meta-physical* society, and that it is still *de rigueur* for US politicians to make solemn, sentimental, high-toned appeals to the Almighty's special regard for their great country. (Here, incidentally, is another problem with the ideal, utopian or rhetorical sense of culture: the fact that one cannot just briskly dispense with it, yet that all it is likely to do is expose the embarrassing gap between the ideal and the actual, reveal the performative contradiction between what capitalist societies do, and what they say they do). It was, of course, not the atheistic left which brought religion low as an ideological form, but, in a supreme irony, industrial capitalism itself, whose ruthless secularising and rationalising cannot help discrediting the very metaphysical values it needs to legitimate itself.

Culture, delicate, evanescent, impalpable creature that it is, was called upon in the nineteenth century to stand in for religion itself – a function which brought it under such intense pressure that it began to betray pathological symptoms. Religion had always done the job much better, with its close fusion of the intelligentsia (priests) and popular masses, of ritual and inwardness, its linking of the immediate textures of personal experience to the most cosmic of questions. With religion, an aesthetic ritual or symbolic form involves millions of the common people and is directly relevant to their daily lives: an extraordinary cultural phenomenon in the age of modernity. Culture in the minority, specialised sense, however, cannot play this role, since it is shared by too few people; while culture in the more corporate, anthropological sense cannot do it either because it is too clearly a terrain of combat rather than a transcendental resolution of conflict.

Culture in the traditional sense, then, is nowadays assailed by identity politics, market culture and postmodern post-ideological scepticism – yet the irony is that it colludes with these antagonists too, and sometimes helps to create them. Identity politics at its worst – paranoid, supremacist, bigoted – is a kind of bad particularity which is just the flipside of a bad universality. Culture as civility provides the frame within which culture as marketeering can securely operate. And high and market culture quite often share the same conservative values, since an art at the mercy of market forces is likely to be, just as cautious, conformist and anti-experimental as the most respectably canonical of works. In any case, much high NATO culture is far to the left of NATO. Homer wasn't a liberal humanist, Shakespeare put in a good word for radical egalitarianism, Balzac and Flaubert detested the bourgeoisie, Tolstoy rejected private property and so on. It is not what these works of art say, but what they are made to signify, which is the political point.

Culture as universality has much more going for it than the postmodernists seem to imagine. It was a revolutionary, earth-shattering notion in its day – the extraordinary idea that you were entitled to freedom and respect, liberty, equality and self-determination, not because of who you were or where you came from or what you did, but simply because you were a human being: a member of the universal species. It was the *ancien regime* here that was particularist, local, differential, and abstraction and universality which were radical, as the supposedly historically-minded postmodernists don't seem to appreciate. Marx was an apostle of Enlightenment; but Marxism is a curious cross-breed of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, since Marx also recognised that if a genuine universality were to be fashioned (and we cannot presume with the liberal humanist that it is simply given), it would have to be constructed in and through difference and particularity (which Marx sometimes alludes to as use-value). Particularity, as with the Hegel from whom Marx is cribbing here, must return again, this time at the level of the genuinely universal; which simply means that the universal reciprocities of socialism must be established, but as relations between the richly individuated, sensuously particularised men and women which class-society had helped to foster. Any more-than-parochial community has to begin with where and what people, parochially or bodily, are; and if it can do so successfully it is because there is no local particular which is not open-ended, differential and overlapping. The purely local, strictly speaking, does not exist. People are what they are because their sensuous particularity is *constitutively* open to an outside: to be fully on the inside of a body, language or culture is to already open to a beyond.

We have witnessed in our time an enormous inflation of the notion culture, to the point where the vulnerable, suffering, material, bodily, *objective* species-life which we share most evidently in common has been hubristically swept aside by the follies of so-called culturalism. It is true that culture is not only what we live by, but in a sense what we live for. Affection, relationship, memory, belonging, emotional fulfilment, intellectual enjoyment: these are closer to most of us than trade arrangements

or political contracts. Yet nature will always finally have the edge over culture, a phenomenon known as death, however much neurotically self-inventing societies seek implicitly to deny it. And culture can always be too close for comfort. Its very intimacy is likely to grow morbid and obsessional unless we place it in an enlightened political context, one which can temper these immediacies with more abstract, but also in a way more generous, affiliations. Culture in our time has waxed overweening and immodest. It is time, while acknowledging its significance, to put it firmly back in its place.

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Kultura danes niha med estetsko-normativnim in antropološko-opisnim pomenom, med univerzalizmom in partikularizmom. Estetska ideja kulture se je na Zahodu od razsvetljenstva znatno preoblikovala: funkcionirala je kot utopična kritika civilizacije in vodila v spoznanje o nujnosti radikalnih družbenih sprememb; Herder in nemški idealizem sta omajala razsvetljenski univerzalizem s predstavo, da je kultura razločevalen, tradicijsko-etnični način življenja; zahodni imperializem se je soočal z množico tujih oblik življenja in iskal potrdilo za svoje lastne privilegije; kulturna industrija, značilna za sodobno družbo, je simbolno produkcijo vključila v blagovno proizvodnjo, pojem kultura pa se je vpletel še v politike vzpostavljanja identitete (od feminizma do revolucionarnega nacionalizma). Nekdanja ideja o kulturi kot soglasju in duhovnem preseganju vsega posvetnega in razlikovalnega je zato v krizi. Kultura je postala arena spopadov. Kaže se kot vojna med Kulturo in kulturami, tj. med domnevno splošno veljavno omiko in vrednotami najrazličnejših načinov življenja. Čeprav je Kultura sama kulturno pogojena (je Zahodna in novoveška), se ima za implicitni standard vrednotenja kultur. Kulture niso kultivirane, temveč so izrazito, celo bojevito partikularne. Konflikt med Kulturo in kulturami je tudi spopad med Zahodom, ki se ima za nosilca univerzalizma (»natovska visoka kultura«, po F. Jamesonu), in nacionalizmom, regionalizmom, nativizmom itn. ostalega sveta. Kulturni spopad poteka tudi znotraj transnacionalnih korporacij: bolj ko se univerzalnost prazni v sinonim za globalizacijo, bolj patološke so kulturne obrambe pred njo. Zahod po ošibitvi vloge klasičnih nacionalnih držav svojim transnacionalnim političnim formam neuspešno išče primerne kulturne korelative.

Kultura v normativnem pomenu se znotraj postmoderne sooča z množično kulturo in razmahom raznovrstnih identitetnih politik. Bolj ko postmoderna tržna kultura prodira v svet, bolj intenzivno se išče duhovno legitimizacijo zanjo. Relativizem postmoderne kulture pa ruši ravno trdne vrednote Kulture, s katerimi bi tržna kultura hotela kriti svoje delovanje. Zahod si na politični ravni ne more privoščiti skeptičnega post-metafizičnega ozračja, čeprav ga sam proizvaja in z njim izvotljuje visoko retoriko svojih lastnih idejnih temeljev. Stremi namreč h globalni avtoriteti in se sooča s sovražniki, ki imajo za sabo močnejše legitimizacijske sestave, npr. islam. Kriza zahodne kulture je povezana tudi z neuspehom religije v kontekstu industrijskega kapitalizma, brezobzirne sekularizacije in racionalizacije. Kultura ni mogla zdržati vloge

nadomestka religije, kakršno je imela od 19. st. naprej. V nasprotju z religijo je ostala omejena na manjšine in specialna področja.

Avtor se v polemiki s postmodernim kulturalizmom zavzema za vnovičen premislek univerzalističnega razumevanja kulture. To je bilo sprva, v obzorju razsvetljenstva, revolucionarna in radikalna ideja – vrednote svobode, enakosti, spoštovanja in samoodločbe so pripadale človeku ne glede na rod, razred, poreklo in druge partikularnosti, na katerih je temeljil stari režim. Marx je razsvetljenski univerzalizem povezal z romantičnim partikularizmom, a tako, da je vse, kar je posebno, obenem konstitutivno odprto in diferencialno. Kolikor kultura funkcionira kot psevdoreligiozna tolažba zaradi meje, ki jo človeški vrsti postavlja narava s smrtjo, lahko postane preveč intimna in morbidna. Zato jo je treba postaviti v razsvetljeni politični kontekst, v katerem se njena neposrednost kanalizira v abstraktnije povezave.

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