

# The Long Tradition and Social Science

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IN THE FIRST STANZA of *The English Flag*, the great Rudyard Kipling defended worldliness against parochialism by asking, "And what should they know of England who only England knows?" I elect, with a small modification, to paraphrase Kipling in this farewell to a century of mixed blessings: "And what should they know of Social Science who only Social Science knows?" Arguably, one could as easily ask this for policy analysis, communication studies, urban affairs, social welfare, or any number of subject areas that touch the human condition. The point of the long tradition is to make us aware that the world we inhabit is far more complex, expansive, and meaningful than the parochial fields in which we profess to possess expertise.

I sense that many if not most of us are keenly aware that ontology is greater than epistemology. The world about us is always larger than our slice of knowledge about that world. We are less aware of how to translate that sense of the world into the work we perform; or more

critically, why so often do our professional efforts fall dramatically short of expectations. What is it about disciplinary boundaries that shuts out the light to so much of our culture, and in so doing makes us impervious to the grand sweep of events, and more urgently, incapable of reaching an audience, much less the stars, with our work?

This would be a challenge to explain in an encyclopedia much less in a few brief remarks. But I will cut to the quick and try my hand at a response. For I believe deeply that, if we are to have an instauration, a Baconian rebirth of social scientific learning, a move beyond the parochialism of our moment, we need to address just this point. To some extent the answer is found in the very notion of a common culture embedded in the long tradition, that to which we are all privy, but choose to ignore, or even worse, denigrate, in the name of specialization, specificity, and stratification. While these are necessary attributes of social science today, without the shared sense of a common culture, specialization and specificity are limited exercises in futility and displeasure—our own.

Stratification permits us to make, nay encourages, distinctions predicated on race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, tribe, neighborhood, city, state, nation, region, and even civilization. But

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to understand is not necessarily to resolve, or even to make a little better. Indeed, some efforts at distinction make things worse. For example, a distinguished psychologist, Professor Richard Lynn, informed the British Psychological Society on Friday, March 27th, 1998, that genetic engineering and natural trends would make a divided world a distinct possibility. "The two kinds of people would be so dissimilar that it would almost be like having two separate specimens of humankind." And for those obtuse enough to fail to get the point, he concludes by inventing the idea of an "intelligence gene pool," in which the net effect is that IQ in wealthier countries was increasing at the rate of about 3 IQ points a decade. But in developing countries, "the lowering of genetic intelligence was not compensated by [any corresponding] increase in environmental intelligence." With such thinking, with such a categorical denial of the commonality of the human race, could we have anything in store to look forward to other than a race war, and schisms even more hideous than those with which we have been faced this century? This is a rhetorical question only to those who prefer to walk about this planet with their eyes shut tight. We owe to this kind of thinking a sense of just how different conservative views are from reactionary dogmas.

The daring restoration of racial modes of analysis, whatever their phylogenetic sources, indicates that our larger task can only be performed by an awareness and appreciation of what the human race has in common. Before the clever retort is made that I am falling into the trap of utopianism in order to escape the perils of reality, let me assure you that my life and work are such that bland optimism is remote from my mode of observation. I do not imagine for a moment that the common culture can wash away centuries of distinctions, discriminations, and disasters. But such an appreciation of

the long tradition can at least move us away, however haltingly, from the widespread belief that armed struggle, mass violence, and the war between civilizations are the only mechanisms left at our disposal in conflict resolution. Indeed, this sort of cultural conservation is the central instrument against the acceptance of impotent psychological, chemical, and medical placebos—pleas for togetherness based on common suffering, self-pity, victim status, and collective egotism, rather than core values.

In order to avoid confusion it should be said plainly that the common culture is not always nor uniformly comprised of great works of art, music, or cinema; nor even having an apriori set of premises. But a common culture does have to cut deep into the consciousness of a society. For all of its historical flaws and ideological correctness, the film *Titanic* well illustrates this. At one and the same time, the film explores issues of life and death, the power of nature over technology, love and hate, courage and cowardice, good and evil—the full range of philosophical polarities—while at the same time, the film also examines specific issues of social class on board the ship: ethnic relations between passengers and workers, male-female mores, generation gaps in such mores, and the mixed motives and vanities of people on board the fated vessel. Whether the film constitutes great art is a quite separate matter. Its ability to reach people, and touch deeply held moral sentiments is beyond question.

I am not making a case for the mystical or the metaphysical. Nor for that matter would I urge upon you subjectivism, as if feelings can substitute for facts. We already have too much of that tendency prevalent in the social sciences. But there is a type of knowledge so embedded in the culture, so profound, that it casts a bright light on all that it touches. Without that universal component, locating that which is universally true is virtually im-

possible. Whether expressed in art, music, poetry, whatever, the core values derived from the common culture inspire us the more because they provide grounds for shared communication and understanding. T.S. Eliot captured this sentiment well in his *Christianity and Culture* (1960): "The culture of an individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class, and the culture of the group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society to which that group or class belongs. Therefore it is the culture of the society that is fundamental." In his own special way, Eliot was paying his respects to an epoch of social analysis, an age in which issues of culture are wrapped up in demands for equity. Conservatism no less than liberalism must confront a century of social science, not as mortal foe but as plain fact.

What is so strange, as we close this millennium, is not just a lack of culture, but a revolt against culture. In its place we find a series of canards about deconstruction, relativity of values, and the racial or ethnic bases of judgment itself. In these various guises inheres the denial that classical values in the common culture even exist. The social carriers of such nihilist rubbish have managed to betray the long tradition, a major source that in decades past was an engine fusing modern culture with social research. With the collapse of the Soviet Empire, and the near universal rejection of communist tyranny, has come a revolt against history itself, and with it, a rebellion against the cultural tradition that nourished the "illusions" of radicals and reactionaries alike. A wave of instantaneous and immediate gratification has affected social science in particular, making it subject to a crude empiricism that serves the ends of know-nothings. Put another way, as Richard Rorty recently noted in *Achieving Our Country* (1998), we are victims of "a spectatorial, disgusted, mocking [cultural] Left, given

over to semi-conscious anti-Americanism." In a less impassioned way, what needs to be said is that the conservative cause fears egalitarianism as subversive of liberty, while the liberal cause far too frequently see egalitarianism as a stepping-stone to supremacy. It remains the essential task of an honest sociology of knowledge to look at both unflinchingly in the spirit of Karl Mannheim, and expose as well as explore the self-interest of ideology and the illusion of utopia alike.

The cultural thread is universal and national. In a democratic society such as ours, the breakdown of the former results in the loss of the latter. America is at odds with itself in a cultural shuffle. A transvaluation of liberal values took place between the mid-twentieth century and the end of the century. We had F.O. Matthiessen's *The American Renaissance* (1968); Daniel J. Boorstin's *An American Primer* (1995); Henry Steele Commager's *The American Mind* (1959); a plethora of outstanding books on Irish ethnicity, Jewish identity, Boston community, and Max Lerner's seriously underrated summing up *America As A Civilization* (1987). Indeed, the idea of an American century generated by Henry Luce lurked behind some of these works, and celebration became a common and not always pleasant denominator. Patriotism, ethnic identity, and pluralistic religion became ascriptive touchstones for a nation triumphant in two world wars. But all of this seemed to add up to a wholesome unity of sentiment and purpose.

By the close of this century, diversity remained a theme, but unity of means and ends did not. Instead, the measurement of liberal values was conflated into a pseudo-demographic counting of race, gender, and class (running a distant third with the demise of Marxism as a universal faith). The slightest deviance from an imaginary egalitarian norm became a cause for moaning and groaning. Aesthetic judgment and scientific worth

yielded to social variables of a spurious sort. For example, as soon as issues of women in the workplace were resolved in wage terms, the goals shifted to harassment in the workplace. The slightest undercount from census to professional panel representation became the subject of a new ideological cause, a new social movement, and a new contention concerning political gerrymandering. In the process, the sense of the whole, the sense of America dissolved, and with it, the notion of a common culture. All this took place in the lofty environment of academic life. Happily, untouched was the ordinary American sense of personal balance, respect for law and measurement of worth by performance, not by color or sex or ethnic background.

The failure of new movements to reposition stratification within a properly egalitarian mode is such that animosity has become a permanent part of the American psychological experience. At the same time, the extremism of such new movements within the academy reflects the inner history of university expansion more than any common thread. Indeed, the animus of the new stratification advocates reveals more in common with the old elitism than the new populism. The classic assumption of the founding fathers of the American nation that a person, whatever his or her race, religion or national origin, should count as one—not more than and not less than one—dissolved into a rush to repair historic injustices by the imposition of current injustices. Conservatism did not emerge triumphant, but liberalism suffered a stunning collapse of nerve. The latter became a critical source of discriminations in place of equities. And in this new climate of division, advocates of fanaticism, secessionism, subjectivism, and relativism rode in like the four horses of the apocalypse to stake their claims.

This new millennium situation must be spoken of frankly if we are to move

beyond the current dualism between the long tradition and the narrow empiricism of some social sciences. This is a condition that is far more polarized and pervasive than *The Two Cultures* (1993) of which C.P. Snow spoke more than thirty years ago. At stake is not just the soul of American liberal thought, but the heart of social thought itself, or that part of it given over to the study of large systems and whole societies. The present status of the social sciences reveals polarization between those performing bookkeeping functions that do not require a theoretical grounding, much less a culture, and those engaged in a mysticism that requires for evidence little else than one's own personal proclivities, biases, and experiences. This condition cannot long endure. Social science is badly shredded. In the present cocoon-like atmosphere inhabited by confusion between profession and politics, one finds joyous disregard for the cares of the larger world, and concern only for declaring victim-status to those whom the social sciences consider morally virtuous.

The concern for a common culture is neither a flight into elitism nor a trip into anti-intellectualism. Conservatism is not a vague regard for esoterica of past centuries. The common culture is a concern for those shared and abiding values that make possible innovation and understanding in our own work. To hear the final round of works of Dmitri Shostakovich is not just to hear tough music. It is to share with the Russian people a revolt against its tyranny in one of the few forms permissible during the final stage of Stalinism—pure music. In the ripping and tearing of a David Oistrakh on the *Violin Concerto* or Mstislav Rostropovich wailing on the *Cello Concerto* we find the reason for Russia itself.

In language as well as in music, in the rich literary heritage extending from Anton Chekhov to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn we find answers to social riddles in

memory. What Vladimir Lenin understood about Czarist bureaucracy as expressed in *Ward Number Six* (1988), his adversaries came to appreciate about Communist bureaucracy as expressed in *The Cancer Ward* (1968). Culture is an instrument of truth, not because it seeks to perform any tendentious political role, but because it mirrors the inner life of a society with greater force than any other mode of quotidian activity. With a knowledge of the common culture, sociologists are drawn to the central considerations of this age, giving them a full play in terms we know best: patterns of stratification and hierarchy, types of interaction typifying each society.

As with Solzhenitsyn's trilogy *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974-1979), we have again been reminded this time by Stéphane Courtois and his co-workers in *The Black Book of Communism* (1999) of the cost attached to the breakdown of a common culture. Whole categories of people, real or imagined—Cossacks, Kulaks, bourgeois reactionaries—were exterminated in Russia, not for anything they had done, but for who they were. Concentration camps, forced labor, and terror were elevated to a system of government. Communism invoked "class," and Nazism invoked "race." Together these twin scourges of the century liquidated people who in the eye of the rulers had already been condemned by history at one end and genetics at another. And as Tony Judt reminds us in reviewing Courtois's work: "Mass murder was not an unintended consequence, but part of the Fascist and Communist projects from the start." It reached a crescendo when, in true Orwellian fashion, the Maoist Chinese revolution within a revolution, managed to wipe out all culture—save the book of its leader. The Nazis had book burning, the Communists avoided that embarrassment by having few books—and those published by the government printing press. We are flanked by ex-

tremists who think social science is a means to a political end, and by those who believe that sociology is a furtive way of smuggling into the popular rhetoric a commitment to socialism. This is insidious nonsense. The social sciences are ends in themselves. They are systems of human organization which serve the higher ends of knowledge, not purveyors of raw data or would-be holders of power.

American life managed to avoid the worst excesses of twentieth century European experience. The core culture has helped. Our language and literature offer a treasure chest from which themes can be drawn to enrich social science. There is Elia Kazan's appreciation of communist and fascist politics in *A Face in the Crowd*; the twin themes of greed and national betrayal in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, of family dissolution and drug addiction in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Days Journey into the Night*; of male brutishness and insecurities yoked to female dreams and illusions in Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire*. And more abstractly in musical terms, there is the sense of space one finds in Aaron Copeland's *Appalachian Spring* and *Billy the Kid*; the sense of America discovering its moral soul in everything George Gershwin did, from *Porgy and Bess* to *An American in Paris*, the urban and ethnic tensions in Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, the deconstruction of patriotism in Charles Ives's national marches, as well as *Three Places in New England*; the native romanticism in Samuel Barber's *Adagio For Strings and Orchestra*; the interplay of blues and joys in Scott Joplin's ragtime. These too are themes rich in content for serious ethnography. Indeed, to study Black life in America in a serious way is to spend a lifetime listening to Jelly Roll Morton, John Coltrane and Theolonius Monk.

Can one forget the place of film in the formation of an American consciousness, not to mention social movements? Film

may not have been an American discovery, but it most certainly has become our art form par excellence. Can one honestly understand American national character without a close look at Charlie Chaplin in *City Lights* and *Modern Times*, Katharine Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story*, Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*, Marlon Brando in *On The Waterfront*, Sidney Poitier in *A Raisin in the Sun*, or Jack Nicholson in *Five Easy Pieces*, or Faye Dunaway in *Chinatown*? Doubtless I am revealing my preferences as well as my age. But it would not take too much for any person from any past generation to generate his or her own preference. We all share an experience of these films because we all share in a common culture. The national mosaic is about John Walker's *Halliwel's Film Guide*, and Stanley Sadie's *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, as well as David Sills's *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*.

Everyone can pick and choose his or her own favorites in all these areas. What we can hardly avoid is the impact of the visual, of sight wedded to sound, on our sense of social life at century's end. Art imitates life and life imitates art because they are essentially one and the same: aspects of the common culture. Nor is this always a pleasant or positive thought. I sometimes think that what now cements the United States of America is CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN, and what we call politics is something which takes place in a small place called "Inside the Beltway"—that view of the universe held by those who inhabit Washington, D.C. Even such a concentration of communications is a source of social science potential to those who live "Outside the Beltway" in America. The struggle of the twentieth century increasingly involved those who control the channels of communication, just as assuredly as the struggle of the nineteenth century took place over control of the means of production. That is

what every publication that attempts to transcend the parochial aims to achieve. To do otherwise is to separate sociological means from political ends, as the demographers did under Nazi Germany, as they figured out the block-by-block configuration of Jews and Gentiles in cities like Berlin, Warsaw, and Vienna. Separating means from ends, they could do this dance of death without batting an eye as to how such data was to be used.

All societies have a cultural realm, for it is in the culture that we join ranks with others. Of course there are differences of quality in these cultures. Judgments will vary on such points. But it is precisely the common culture that gives us a humanity in common, that permits us to feel the same way about the big things, about life and death, about love and hate, about lies and truths, about goods and evils—about Shakespeare and Goethe, Cervantes and Dante, Tolstoy and Melville. On such matters, being a man or a woman, a black or a white, young or old, a Russian or an American, dwindles in importance. Ascription and achievement may help us to identify and predict forms of behavior at the level of social hierarchy or voting behavior. But at night we must confront our mortality and our morality. And on such matters, in the privacy of our souls, it is the common culture that trumps the stratified sample.

This is not a plea for a Eurocentric in contrast to an American vision. It would be ironic to hold up for emulation a continent that served as a fascist and community chanel house for more than one hundred million people in the course of this twentieth century. Nor is this a plea for snobbery, or for higher education detached from everyday *angst*. Mozart trios and quartets were played on the way to the gas chambers for many of those millions. The forces of human destruction are at work wherever nihilism, relativism, and subjectivism gain a foothold; often disguised as a reinterpretation

tion or “deconstruction” of the great works of civilization. Early in the twentieth century, Europe shed light, but by the third decade it also revealed the darkness of a culture divorced from the person.

Our culture is common because our values are shared, but not cheap: life and death, love and hate, friends and enemies, success and failure, virtue and vice. In short, every polarity and a wide range of emotions in between are the core concerns of us all. The sociologist will examine how different sets of people perceive such grave matters. The political scientist will examine how government addresses such polarities in search of a consensus. Psychologists will have a field day figuring out why polarities of mind are so critical in moral judgment. Economists will see these categories as evidence for or against market forces. But at the end of the day, our common culture will help us renew our shared humanity. And in this ineluctable fact, in our historical inheritance of a tradition of decency and civility, is the best hope we have for the survival and growth of the social sciences.

Personal beliefs, unlike formal systems, are not always neat and tidy. But then again, neither is the course of science or the projects of society. The university is an assemblage of diverse voices singing many songs in many tongues. It is also a place in which students vote with their feet and agencies with their money as to which areas are important. The students are the future, the bearers of our common culture. Let us take heed. For they also tell us for whom and when the owl of Minerva strikes. To mock the young is a sure sign of our own dotage. To simply imitate the young is a sure sign of our foolishness. The vast gray area between mocking and mimesis is one that we must navigate. Armed with both the exact tasks of our disciplines and the general appreciation of the common culture, we in the social sciences have a

continuing chance at survival and even growth—and helping others do likewise.

Such an outcome will take a great deal of courage as well as culture. And if I may be permitted to conclude as I began with reference to a British tradition, to which I confess an abiding lifelong affection, we can have no better guide than Matthew Arnold’s finale to his masterful *Culture and Anarchy* (1869): “In all directions our habitual courses of action seem to be losing efficaciousness, credit and control, both with others and even with ourselves. Everywhere we see the beginnings of confusion, and we want a clue to some sound order and authority. This we can only get by going back upon the actual constructs and forces which rule our life, seeing them as they really are, connecting them with other interests and forces, and enlarging our whole view and rule of life.” I take this to be neither a pessimistic or optimistic reading of events, but simply a call to what we do best: think seriously about the affairs and actions of our fellow human beings.

We are at a cultural no less than millennial crossroads: the issue of moment is neither the triumph of liberalism nor the prospects for conservatism. Those were pleasant mid-century struggles. Now the stakes are far higher: the forces of civility, rationality, and appeals to evidence, in stern contrast to those of incivility, irrationality and appeals to raw emotion. In this momentous struggle, social science can remain true to its calling from Durkheim, Spencer, Weber, Mannheim, Nisbet, among many others; or it can be enlisted and co-opted by fanatics for whom the present moment in time and the present system in place must be overthrown at all costs. The outcome of this struggle will be of concern not only to the life of social science but to the course of civilization itself. Portentous as this may sound; this is so because social science has become a central part of our civilization.