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Breaking Ranks: C. P. Snow and the Crisis of Mid-Century Liberalism, 1930–1980

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C. P. Snow's identification of 'two cultures', as the literary critic F. R. Leavis pointed out in 1962, represents not an insight but a cliché, one that invites the repetition of further clichés about the origins of a divided culture, the need to bridge cultures, the emergence of a third culture, or the reality of one culture. Yet this recurrent feature of 'two cultures' talk does not nullify the concept's value as an object of study, if these discussions are treated as revealing points of entry into foreign historical contexts. This article adopts this approach, unearthing the liberal position that Snow developed as a novelist and critic from the 1930s, that he advanced in the form of a disciplinary lament in *The Two Cultures* (Snow, C.P. 1959. *The two cultures and the scientific revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.), and that — to his distress — increasingly came under radical critique from the mid-1960s. Ultimately, the technocratic liberalism that Snow associated with science at mid-century came to be closer to American neo-conservatism by 1980. By tracking the fortunes of the ideological position that structured *The Two Cultures*, rather than lifting that text out of its moment in an attempt to engage its arguments today, this article testifies to the abiding value of contextual analysis at a moment when intellectual historians are increasingly inclined to question and even displace it.

KEYWORDS C. P. Snow, liberalism, Britain, mid-twentieth century, two cultures

Introduction

Certain ideas repay scrutiny. 'Experience', 'creativity', 'democracy', the 'self', 'common sense', 'civil war', 'happiness', 'genius', and 'equality', in Darrin McMahon's recent round-up, command attention not only for their density and significance, but also for the ways that attending to their shifting meanings across time expands the temporal limits of intellectual history more generally.¹ Taken

together, McMahon suggests, these studies challenge the previously dominant position of contextualism in intellectual history, returning attention to the autonomy and structure of ideas in their own right, while licensing scholars to critically engage ideas in the present, rather than merely recover their meanings in the past.²

C. P. Snow's notion of the 'two cultures', the humanities and the sciences, is not one of these ideas (Snow 1959). It is, rather — as the literary critic F. R. Leavis insisted in 1962 — a cliché, the invocation of which invites further clichés asserting that there is really only one culture, or that there are actually three cultures, or that some new development promises to bridge the cultures at last.³ Snow's formulation is endlessly cited, but those citations seek less to draw from the concept's wells of significance than to launch digressions into whatever the author wanted to say anyway. This dynamic was immediately evident in a forum shortly after Snow's original lecture in 1959, in which the contributors pivoted from their ostensible concern about the humanities and sciences to launch disparate discussions of the crisis in the plastic arts, the need to enter the space race, and the salaries of the professoriate.⁴ And it continues to this day, as supposedly new 'two cultures' divides are invoked to call attention to very different discussions about matters ranging from public policy to national security (Ortolano 2008, 143–145). The 'two cultures', in short, serves less as the subject of contemplation in itself, than as a mechanism to justify the contemplation of something else.

This does not mean that the 'two cultures' does not warrant historical analysis, but it does point to the need for a particular kind of analysis — one best understood as an exercise in the fine-grained contextualism currently being rethought by intellectual historians. Here I agree with Warren Breckman when, writing in the same volume as McMahon, he casts contextualist analysis less as a methodological choice than a historical disposition; less a technique to take up or put down, than a discipline's signature attentiveness to time and place (Breckman 2014, especially 288–289). Because invocations of the 'two cultures', while lacking either layered or transcendent meanings, do offer historians access to the wider concerns of their authors and the deeper assumptions of their moments. A generation ago, Joan Scott explained that 'man' and 'woman' were at once 'empty and overflowing categories'. *Empty* because without any fixed, ultimate meaning, but *overflowing* because continually invested with multiple, contradictory meanings in need of historical excavation (Scott 1986, 1074). Something similar might be said about the 'two cultures', which commands attention not because it reveals something lasting about the relationship between disciplines across time, and not because it speaks to or explains something about our world, but because its invocation signals a moment when discussions of those disciplines are invested with particular meanings — and it is those meanings, and that moment, that the historian can recover.

So rather than recycling laments about disciplinary divisions, failures of communication, and fields drifting apart, this article unearths the ideological position that structured *The Two Cultures*. In order to reveal that unfamiliar position, Part I focuses not upon the text's remarks about science, but rather upon its idiosyncratic reading of literary history. Far from a trivial detour away from Snow's

primary argument, this left-of-center assault upon reactionary Modernism advanced an ideological position that Snow had been developing since the 1930s (Hollinger 1995). This position drew upon a reading of historical progress that, Snow believed, Modernist writers had resented and resisted, but the progress he lauded remained liberal in the sense that it sought not to dismantle social hierarchies, but rather to remake them. It was this reforming vision that structured *The Two Cultures*, only to run aground amid the more radical demands associated with 'the Sixties', until it eventually emerged — as shown in Part II — as a British iteration of American neo-conservatism. Between 1930 and 1980, however, Snow figured as one of the great Anglo-American exponents of a confident, reforming, technocratic liberalism — a history revealed by locating *The Two Cultures* within, rather than freeing it from, its historical context.

I

Although little remarked today, *The Two Cultures* leveled a series of inflammatory charges against Modernist writers. He recalled a scientist having asked him, 'Yeats, Pound, Wyndham Lewis, nine out of ten of those who have dominated literary sensibility in our time — weren't they not only politically silly, but politically wicked? Didn't the influence of all they represent bring Auschwitz that much nearer?' (Snow 1959, 5). Faced with such charges, Snow admitted, he could not defend the indefensible. 'The honest answer', he acknowledged, 'was that there is, in fact, a connection, which literary persons were culpably slow to see, between some kinds of early-twentieth art and the most imbecile expressions of anti-social feeling' (Snow 1959, 7–8). But he immediately assured his audience that a new generation of writers, of which he was a part, had rejected the aesthetics and ethics of this discredited Modernism: '[S]ome of us', he declared, 'turned our backs on the art and tried to hack out a new or different way for ourselves' (Snow 1959, 8). As a result, he continued, there remained hope for the literary culture yet, despite the dubious morality of the Modernist generation. '[T]hough many of those writers dominated literary sensibility for a generation, that is no longer so', Snow promised, such that it was ultimately 'ill-considered of scientists to judge writers on the evidence of the period 1914–50' (Snow 1959, 8).

While less familiar than the claims about two sorts of intellectuals, these startling remarks about literature figured centrally in Snow's thesis. This is because, in addition to being a response to its times — the launch of Sputnik, the expansion of the universities, the dismantling of the British Empire, and Harold Wilson's 'white heat' — the Rede Lecture also represented the culmination of a longer campaign to refashion literature and criticism since the Second World War. From 1945, Snow steadily gathered literary friends and allies who shared his ambition of rejecting Modernism in favor of a return to realism instead.⁵ And just as *The Two Cultures* did not simply call for more science, this group did not aim merely to reform literature: they directed their campaign against what they viewed as Modernism's hostility towards contemporary society, seeking instead to celebrate that society for the material progress and social opportunity they

believed it afforded — progress and opportunity afforded and symbolized by modern science. In 1959, after more than a decade of (often obscure) toil, Snow was positioned to deliver the sharpest version of these views to date in *The Two Cultures*.

This position might be understood as a *technocratic liberalism*, which envisioned talented individuals working through existing institutions to extend the achievements and benefits of modern society. Snow believed that, beginning with England's Industrial Revolution, science, technology, and industry had created a world offering material progress and social opportunity to many more people than ever before.⁶ But he also believed that literature had a key role to play in explaining and advancing this vision, despite having abdicated that role in a reactionary turn between 1914 and 1950.⁷ During that generation, he explained, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner abandoned the effort to craft narratives about society — in Snow's shorthand, 'realism' — in favor of celebrating technical experimentation and social alienation — which Snow called 'Modernism'. He referred to the latter as the 'anti-novel', represented above all by *Finnegans Wake*. To Snow, the anti-novel abandoned any effort to depict the social world and reach a wide audience, and as such he believed that it effectively rejected society itself. Instead, he maintained, Modernist writers glorified the alienated individual, a tendency that led them to embrace reactionary attitudes — and here he named Joyce, Lewis, Pound, and Lawrence. This political reaction derived from hostility to what he called the 'scientific revolution', that ongoing phase of industrialization in which science and technology increased economic capacity.⁸ This development, in Snow's view, had radically increased social complexity, at precisely the moment that the social sciences began to fill the roles previously claimed by writers. Rather than exploring and conveying these developments through fiction, Modernist writers instead withdrew from a society they could no longer influence — or even understand.

But Snow believed that, towards the end of the 1940s, he detected renewed hope for literature. The writers who attracted his attention included Pamela Hansford Johnson, Harry Hoff (who wrote as William Cooper), and William Gerhardt, all of whom — like Snow himself — were interested in exploring the relationship between the individual and society. In Snow's optimistic reading of history, the industrial and scientific revolutions had created vast new bureaucracies, which summoned forth a new class of professionals to staff them. The resulting society promised material comfort to a greater share of the population than ever before, but to realize this promise these new professionals — managers, technicians, scientists, civil servants, and others — needed to understand this society, these institutions, and themselves. Snow was drawn towards writers who embraced this challenge, by attempting to explain (rather than repudiate) the new society that was emerging. These writers rejected the anti-social Modernist detour, and instead drew their inspiration from nineteenth-century realism. It was that heritage, and this movement, that Snow was determined to promote when he moved from Cambridge to London in 1945.

During the next fifteen years, Snow worked privately and publicly to create receptive conditions for this literary style and its attendant social vision. His efforts took three major forms: cultivating a sympathetic cohort, securing

positions of critical authority, and publishing his own work. He first sought to establish a new magazine sympathetic to his literary style. He was driven to this project towards the end of 1947, after critical reviews of his novel *The Light and the Dark* (Snow 1947). He wrote despairingly to S. Gorley Putt, a critic and friend in Exeter, 'So far, failure, and I do not expect anything but abuse from the *New Statesman* and the *Listener*'.⁹ He knew, he said, that he was 'writing dead in the teeth against the fashion', and he confessed that he saw little chance that the cultural establishment would come around to his preferred style.¹⁰ Snow decided, therefore, that there was no choice but to take the initiative: 'We've got to be more active and less proud', he urged Putt.¹¹ Snow wanted Putt to procure a position enabling him to intervene in national literary discussions, and he reported that he was courting the reclusive writer William Gerhardt to act as their patron in that project.

Then, in March that same year, the campaign caught its first break: Pamela Johnson (eventually to become Snow's wife) was approached about founding a new journal, the very project then preoccupying Snow. With *Horizon* and *The Windmill* struggling, Johnson said, her backers believed there could be room for a lively new forum. 'This, I think, is really it at last', she wrote Snow. 'I am anxious that you and Harry [Hoff] and I should meet at the earliest moment and flog out a scheme'.¹² The group gathered for what Snow called a 'council of war' to discuss their new journal, *The Mermaid*.¹³ Plans were up and running, but they needed to identify additional allies and sympathizers. Snow contacted Francis King, a young novelist whose work he admired, reporting that he considered King the most promising male writer under the age of thirty. Might King know of others dissatisfied with recent literature and criticism? 'There's going to be some fun', he assured his prospective protégé, 'now the recent Ice Age of English Literature (1930–1947) is ebbing away'.¹⁴

The 'Ice Age of English Literature' was a characteristic concept in the group's diagnosis of the contemporary novel, which they set out in a polemical manifesto. The manifesto was penned by Snow, and it followed his interpretation of literary history by depicting Modernism as a deviation from the tradition in which they (rather grandiosely) positioned themselves:

We have expressed our belief in the literature of human truth: in the line of Homer, Petronius, and the Latin novelists, the sagas, Lady Murasaki, Chaucer, down to the great nineteenth-century novelists, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, and Balzac: the succession is clear down to the present day in the fine, though minor stream of the French novelists, Roger Martin du Gard and Mauriac: and to the service of this belief we offer *The Mermaid*.¹⁵

Johnson submitted the credo to her publisher, and planning moved forward — only to run aground by May. 'The only development is dismal and apparently conclusive', Johnson wrote despondently. "[F]or the time being," they've shelved the whole scheme'.¹⁶ *The Mermaid* had been canceled due to the paper shortage; deterred but determined, the campaign carried on.

At this point, rather than establishing a new magazine, the group redirected their efforts towards securing positions at established publications instead — and

on this front they succeeded triumphantly. Snow had initially hoped that Johnson would be hired by the *New Statesman* or *Tribune*, and in 1948 she was meeting success on that front.¹⁷ Putt, meanwhile, began angling for a position as a director at the Phoenix Press, promising to bring Snow and Johnson onboard. 'Once inside the citadel of an established quarterly, I shall open the gates to you all', he wrote. 'At a suitable stage, when you personally are entrenched too, you can then open the financial floodgates and expand the paper in size, circulation and power'.¹⁸ He donated a hefty sum to *Wind and the Rain*, enough to secure a position on its advisory board.¹⁹ Snow, meanwhile, urged Alan Pryce-Jones, editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS), to hire Putt (an old wartime colleague), while also securing his own weekly column at the *Sunday Times*. Just eight months after their plans for *The Mermaid* had folded, with Snow at the *Sunday Times*, Johnson at the *Observer*, and Putt at the TLS and *Time and Tide*, their campaign was positioned amid the heights of metropolitan reviewing. 'If we survive ten years', he predicted, 'we shall have some literary power'.²⁰

For nearly four years, in fortnightly reviews of new fiction, Snow praised novels that rejected technical experiment, addressed a wide audience, or featured respectable classes (or, at least, someone striving after that status). He deliberately sought out writers to endorse, a goal he contrasted with Leavis and *Scrutiny*: 'It is important to praise where we can', he reminded Putt. 'Remember that Leavis as a Victorian critic would almost certainly have despised the books which he now studies with loving attention [, and] that you and I would have had to rescue them'.²¹ But when the books that landed on his desk explored darker themes — rape, murder, disease, lynching, suicide — Snow registered dismay. He rebuked Faulkner, for instance, for his grim subject matter, unreadable style, and bizarre hostility to the rules of punctuation: '[A] genuine, but very limited, artist', ran Snow's verdict on that year's Nobel Prize winner, 'and artists of his kind have been rather excessively praised in the last twenty years'.²² Snow used his column to direct attention away from those trends, towards a more accessible and optimistic literature instead. After four years of work, he believed that his critical analysis had made a discernible impact, and the moment seemed right to press the movement forward on other fronts.²³ In 1952, Snow ended his association with the *Sunday Times*, turning his attention to his own fiction in earnest.

Snow's *Strangers and Brothers* novel sequence represents the third phase in this campaign to refashion literature in accord with his liberal social vision. The sequence consisted of eleven novels published between 1940 and 1970, seven of which came out between 1947 and 1960 — the period when Snow's reputation reached its peak, domestically and internationally. Mindful of Snow's fallen position in literary history today, it is important to recall his stature at the time. In the 1950s, he found himself placed among formidable company: one critic compared him to Stendahl, another thought Trollope, still another said Proust.²⁴ '[W]e can speak of "a Snow situation" as we speak of "a Proustian experience,"' wrote Helen Gardner in the *New Statesman*. '[T]he whole enterprise seems to me *the most impressive attempt in our generation to explore through fiction the moral nature of man*'.²⁵ *The Masters* and *The New Men* jointly won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize of 1954, and the Readers' Subscription — the American book club, with a

board comprised of W. H. Auden, Jacques Barzun, and Lionel Trilling — named *The New Men* its selection for February 1955. Indeed, Trilling — the most eminent and important critic in American culture of the time — wrote that Snow had renewed his hope for the novel itself.²⁶

Strangers and Brothers examines the workers and workings of bureaucratic Britain. The narrator, Lewis Eliot, hails from the lower-middle class of a provincial English town, and the series follows Lewis's journey through the labyrinthine establishments of society and state. Along the way readers become acquainted with aristocrats and bureaucrats, barristers and dons, writers and scientists, ministers and civil servants. Their lives intersect in the meritocracies and bureaucracies of modern Britain: bureaucratic meritocracies such as Cambridge colleges and the scientific establishment, and meritocratic bureaucracies such as Parliament and Whitehall. Snow was interested in the relationships between individuals and institutions: 'How much of what we are is due to accidents of our class and time', he asked, 'and how much is due to something innate and unalterable within ourselves?'²⁷ He wanted to tackle that question in a more sympathetic light than the previous generation, and therefore he placed his characters within organizations that simultaneously constrained and enabled their efforts: *constrained* because they are always situated within institutions, but *enabled* because those institutions make meaningful change possible. Both in style and in content, then, *Strangers and Brothers* extended the campaign that began before *The Mermaid* and carried on after the *Sunday Times*. That campaign rejected the Modernist critique of contemporary society, advocating instead the sympathetic consideration of individuals and institutions. Snow's novels created a world in which individuals were optimistic, society was functional, and politics were pragmatic. In other words, *Strangers and Brothers* represented the realization of the worldview that Snow had been developing for decades.

It was at this moment, and in this context, that the invitation arrived to deliver the 1959 Rede Lecture. Snow took as his theme a subject that his biography qualified him to address, the relationship between scientific and literary intellectuals. He tuned this material carefully to the late-1950s moment, connecting the gap between intellectuals to the need to extend economic development to the new nations of the fast-retreating empire, and setting that challenge against the backdrop of the Cold War. At the same time, however, Snow also implicated Modernist writers with the horrors of Auschwitz, and claimed that a new generation — his generation — had redeemed the literary tradition by turning their backs on this Modernism in favor of realism instead. Rather than incidental to *The Two Cultures*, these claims about literature were at its core. Snow was offering not simply a plea for communication or literacy, but indeed a whole social vision, and that vision only becomes clear by attending to his reading of literary history. *The Two Cultures*, then, figured not only as the first in a series of public statements about science over the course of the 1960s, but also as the culmination of a series of private efforts to refashion literature dating back to the war. Snow's strictures against Modernism were inextricable from his ideological position, which he sought to advance not only in his efforts to establish a new literary magazine, in

his reviews of new fiction, and in his own novel sequence, but also — most prominently — in *The Two Cultures*.

II

Alongside its famous identification of a divide among intellectuals, then, *The Two Cultures* advanced an ideological program that Snow had been developing for decades. He argued that literary intellectuals had long harbored animus towards science, technology, industry, and the progress they afforded, and that as a result they were obstructing the development of new nations in Asia and Africa. This technocratic liberalism, devoted not to criticizing social and political institutions but rather to exporting them, located Snow on the left of the political spectrum in 1959. During the next two decades, however — as the 1960s became the ‘Sixties’ — he increasingly found himself, his politics, and his argument in *The Two Cultures* in very different company.

Lionel Trilling, for one, recognized the political stakes buried within *The Two Cultures*. ‘[W]e are not addressing ourselves to a question of educational theory’, he wrote in 1962, ‘or to an abstract contention as to what kind of knowledge has the truest affinity with the human soul. We approach these matters only to pass through them. What we address ourselves to is politics’.²⁸ Snow might have welcomed the insight, not least because, just a few years before, America’s leading critic had anointed his work ‘a paradigm of the political life’.²⁹ In *The Two Cultures*, however, the politics Trilling identified consisted of a naive plea to transcend the purportedly false divisions of the Cold War. ‘[T]he real message of *The Two Cultures*’, he suggested, ‘is that an understanding between the West and the Soviet Union could be achieved by the culture of scientists, which reaches over factitious national and ideological differences’.³⁰ Where he had once admired the generosity of Snow’s vision, Trilling now concluded that he could not endorse so mistaken a position.

Snow was dismayed by Trilling’s reading, protesting that he had arguably written as much about politics as anyone then living. How could Trilling possibly have read him as denying the existence of politics altogether? He concluded that Trilling equated politics with the Cold War, and at that point it was Snow’s turn to register dissent (Snow 1964, 97). He did, indeed, dismiss the significance of distinctions between East and West, believing that capitalism and communism simply represented two different versions of a single civilization. He understood that civilization to have resulted from the industrial revolution, which had delivered unimaginable prosperity to the majority of the Western population. And not just prosperity, but also opportunity, since an industrialized economy required vast organizations and the personnel to manage them. As we have seen, Snow’s criticism and fiction sought to explore these organizations and celebrate these personnel, the managers and bureaucrats who, he believed, made society work. In *The Two Cultures*, he projected this social vision onto a global stage, urging his audience to support reforms making it possible to export industrial society throughout India, Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle

East. In service of this goal he harnessed, rather than denied, Cold War anxieties, warning that if the West failed to act, the Soviets would get there first. Snow's vision was thus predicated upon his faith in the progress that flowed from science and industry, and *The Two Cultures* called for expert professionals to export that progress throughout the global south.

Behind the scenes, Snow worked tirelessly to advance this program in the years following his Rede Lecture, beginning in his beloved Cambridge. Churchill College opened its doors in 1960, but plans for a new science college had been hatched in 1955, when the recently retired Prime Minister lamented that he had not done more to promote British science and technology. His secretary John Colville assembled a Board of Trustees, who began planning a college devoted to science and technology. The scheme was a cooperative venture between industry, government, and the university, united behind the goal of producing scientific and technological leaders to maintain Britain's great-power status: as the press release announcing the plans put it, 'There is a new Battle of Britain to be fought and won in our workshops and laboratories'.³¹ The ambition for Churchill College was not merely to produce more scientists and engineers, but to train leaders in the fields of science and technology; and instead of hiding this ambition, the founders promoted it, describing their aim as the creation of a technological 'corps d'élite'.³² Noel Annan, a founding trustee, confidently dispatched the charges of elitism that inevitably followed. 'On [the] question that this college will set up an undesirable elite', he said, 'I wonder ... whether elites are quite so wicked and undesirable'.³³ Announced the year before Snow's Rede Lecture, its gates opened the year after that lecture, the origins, establishment, and reception of Churchill College testify to a broad technocratic commitment in Britain at the dawn of the 1960s.

The Cambridge Review called *The Two Cultures* a 'ready-made manifesto for the promoters of Churchill College', and this was no coincidence: while writing *The Two Cultures*, Snow was involved with the new college's creation.³⁴ Between 1958 and 1960, he served on the Executive Committee, the Appointments Committee, and the Educational Policy Sub-Committee, and in each capacity he sought to translate his social vision into institutional forms. Rather than attempting to raise the esteem of science, or improve communications between disciplines, as a conventional reading of *The Two Cultures* might suggest, Snow sought to make Churchill a place where professionals would be esteemed and society would be admired. He understood this agenda as an affront to contemporary humanities disciplines, which in his view fostered anti-social tendencies among impressionable undergraduates. He therefore wanted to offer college fellowships to retired civil servants, military officers, and other professionals, so that they could serve as constructive models for Churchill's undergraduates. But his ultimate ambition was to establish Churchill English as a counterweight to Cambridge English. As we have seen, Snow had been attempting to foster an alternative literary-critical establishment since the Second World War. *The Two Cultures* articulated his rationale for that ambition, as we have seen, and meanwhile at Churchill he sought to turn that vision into reality. He used his position as the sole elector of overseas fellows in the arts to recruit like-minded critics to his new Cambridge

base. Snow was attempting to foster a institutional context and intellectual climate broadly in sync with his political vision, and Churchill offered an ideal opportunity to translate that vision — the *The Two Cultures* vision — into physical form.

Lecturing in Britain, celebrated in America, and working arm-in-arm with Annan on behalf of Winston Churchill, Snow felt himself to be aligned with historical progress — but that assuredness became tested in his work for the Labour Party. There was no evidence of any such strain in the early 1960s: while working to shape Churchill, Snow was also a key participant among a group of scientific advisors to the out-of-power Labour. The ‘Gaitskell Group’, as the eminent physicist Patrick Blackett called them, had begun meeting at the Reform Club in 1956, with the goal of persuading Labour to embrace science and technology. The group included scientists such as J. D. Bernal, Jacob Bronowski, and Solly Zuckerman, in addition to Blackett; its political members included the Labour heavyweights Hugh Gaitskell, Harold Wilson, Richard Crossman, and James Callaghan; and from 1958 it also included Snow. Before the 1959 election they assembled a set of policy documents for a new Labour government, with Snow penning the brief on ‘Scientific and Technical Manpower’. This paper argued that Britain needed to reach more deeply into its population, harnessing the talent of all classes and both sexes to produce more scientists and engineers, in order to simultaneously advance domestic modernization and international development.³⁵ The paper read like a civil servant’s rendering of the recommendations of *The Two Cultures* — which is, of course, precisely what it was. The 1959 election proved a heart-breaking defeat, but the Gaitskell Group soldiered on, and upon Labour’s victory five years later — having campaigned by promising the ‘white heat’ of the scientific revolution — Wilson placed the newly ennobled Lord Snow in the House of Lords to show he had meant it. Snow became Parliamentary Secretary to the new Ministry of Technology, a position that seemed to combine his passions for politics, bureaucracy, and technocracy, but his brief tenure in office instead exposed emerging tensions between Labour and himself.

On 10 February 1965, during a debate in the House of Lords about comprehensive education, Viscount Eccles stunned Lord Snow by asking why he sent his own son to Eton. Snow disastrously replied that it would be a mistake to educate one’s children in a manner differently from their peers. A merciless lashing commenced in the press, and the ‘Eton Affair’ became the most notorious episode of Snow’s brief period in government. Yet as enraged letters flooded his office, Snow did not respond like somebody who had misspoken. Indeed, he doubled down, continuing to insist that, however regrettable it might be, society was divided, and he reiterated to concerned citizens that his own son should be educated in the fashion of his peers.³⁶ This searing episode functioned as a pivotal moment, when Snow began to realize that his intellectual commitments were increasingly out-of-step with broader left-wing currents. In *The Two Cultures*, in his paper for the Gaitskell Group, and on innumerable public occasions, he had stressed the need to harness more of the nation’s talent, but after 1965 — in a series of tense disagreements with his friends and his party — he instead dedicated himself to the defense of elites. This shift points to a reorientation in Snow’s priorities, one that placed him out of step not only with Labour’s left, but indeed with

such mainstream figures as Noel Annan, Lionel Robbins, and Shirley Williams. A decade after he had resigned from government, Snow wrote to Williams, Labour's Minister of Education and Science, threatening to break with his lifelong party over comprehensive education, and pleading for Williams to affirm the government's commitment to identifying and training an elite.³⁷

Snow was following a path taken by many liberal intellectuals as the 1960s turned into the 1970s, a rightward shift known in the American context as neo-conservatism. American neo-conservatives were liberal intellectuals who rejected radicalism in the 1960s, shifted their political orientations during the 1970s, and embraced Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. By 1966 Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* magazine, was becoming alarmed by what he viewed as the anti-Americanism of the New Left, and in 1970 he dramatically committed *Commentary* to opposing the new American radicalism. Like these neo-conservatives, Snow became indignant whenever anyone denounced modern society, while neglecting to acknowledge the obvious point that it was the best human society to have ever come along. Snow did not want to question modern society, he wanted to extend it, and if that position garnered allies before 1965, it attracted antagonists after 1965. The national debate over comprehensive education served as the trigger, as we have seen, and during the next fifteen years nothing incurred Snow's wrath more readily than the disparaging of elites. At the same time, he was identifying ever more irritants: the New Left, the working class, and the 'permissive society' all came in for Snow's derision, and from 1967 Snow began complaining in private about the 'liberal package deal'.³⁸ He was referring to an amalgam of measures that liberally minded people seemed expected to support without reservation. He initially meant comprehensive education, but over time the 'liberal package deal' came to include quotas in education, the repeal of censorship laws, and strictures against discussing the genetic basis of intelligence.

These correlations and frustrations locate Snow's experience within the larger crisis of liberalism amid the increasingly radical 'Sixties', but the connections between Snow and neo-conservatism are more than a matter of mere structural affinities. At the time he delivered *The Two Cultures*, Snow was friendly with Podhoretz: they corresponded regularly, and visited each other's homes in London and New York. The friendship frayed, however, when Podhoretz failed to endorse Snow during the controversy over *The Two Cultures*, and over the next decade-plus they went their separate ways — until 1976, when, unprompted, Snow reached out once again. Writing in the *Financial Times*, Snow cited Podhoretz and *Commentary* as the intellectual base the right had long lacked, and he followed up on this sympathetic treatment by writing Podhoretz personally. 'I have been following with close attention your efforts to produce a kind of respectable neo-conservatism', he confided. 'With the greater part of it', he added, 'I am in entire sympathy'.³⁹ He registered discomfort with Podhoretz's more militaristic posturing, and his pained correspondence with Williams over Labour Party policy testifies to an internal struggle that never seemed to trouble the happy warrior Podhoretz. But as the 1970s proceeded, Snow found himself ever more out of step with erstwhile allies on the left, until, in February 1980, he favorably reviewed Podhoretz's explosive political memoir, *Breaking Ranks*. Snow

declared Podhoretz as a brilliant thinker, while sympathetically differentiating the neo-conservative stance from unsavory attacks upon the welfare state. *Breaking Ranks* had been written in an American context, but Snow spotted lessons for his British audience: 'Most English readers will find warnings in *Breaking Ranks*, especially in the campaigns that *Commentary* is fighting against the sillier items in the liberal package deal'.⁴⁰

Snow died on 1 July 1980 — two decades after delivering *The Two Cultures*, and just five months after praising *Breaking Ranks*, and the journey between those two texts locates Snow and his argument within a broader reconfiguration of mid-century liberalism. His obituary ran under the fitting headline 'Laureate of Meritocracy'.⁴¹ And so he was: as civil servant, novelist, literary critic, administrator, politician, columnist, and pundit, Snow advocated a society that would identify, cultivate, and esteem talent, turning talented elites into trained experts for the good of humankind. He believed not only that such a society enabled individuals to realize their potentials, but also that it stood the best chance of ensuring a decent life for the many. In Snow's view, modern society represented the best hope for this laudable social vision, and so he worked tirelessly to realize that vision from Cambridge to Parliament — only to become frustrated during the final fifteen years of his life as this society, and these commitments, became subjected to what seemed nihilistic assaults.

III

Despite Snow's apparent shift from Lib-Lab intellectual to neo-con fellow-traveler, his ideological position had in fact remained consistent. Snow did not experience a political conversion between 1930 and 1980, but the brand of liberalism he championed did encounter changed circumstances. His priorities and allegiances were, to be sure, impacted by the developments of this era — reoriented so as to be distinguished against an energized left — but equally striking are the continuities in Snow's commitments from beginning to end. He consistently advocated the extension of material prosperity through industrial development, and he believed this goal required the expansion of educational opportunity across classes, between sexes, and among nations. If during the 'Sixties' the assumptions structuring these commitments came to be criticized as elitist, ethnocentric, and environmentally unsustainable — criticisms that left Snow ever more estranged from erstwhile friends and allies — in retrospect perhaps his fault was not to have grown more conservative with age, much less to have 'become' a neo-conservative, so much as to have had the misfortune of living and writing on either side of a profound historical rupture.

Rather than lifting *The Two Cultures* out of history, asking it to speak to our moment, I have located *The Two Cultures* within history, in order to shed light on its moment. This contextualization represents a demotion of sorts, since it denies Snow the status of the timeless interlocutor that *The Two Cultures* — abetted by recent trends in intellectual history — might have secured him. But this approach also brings advantages, in avoiding the hackneyed commentaries that *The Two*

Cultures tends to inspire, and instead tracking the fortunes of a significant strain of liberal thought across the twentieth century. And perhaps even Snow, despite this demotion, might not have been wholly displeased, since the result roots him firmly within two sites that he very much admired: in Cambridge, and in history.

Notes

- ¹ The exemplary works that McMahon (2014) cites are: Jay (2005), Mason (2003), Kloppenberg (2016), Seigel (2005), Rosenfeld (2011), Armitage (forthcoming), McMahon (2006), McMahon (2013), Stuurman (2010).
- ² For further developments of this position, see also Baring (forthcoming), Gordon (2014).
- ³ For elaboration of this critique, see Ortolano (2008); in addition to Leavis (1962) reprinted with introduction in Collini (2013).
- ⁴ Allen et al. (1959).
- ⁵ For the broader context of this literary move, as well as a critical reflection upon it, see MacKay (2006).
- ⁶ For further discussion of the relationship between science and modernity, see James (2008).
- ⁷ Snow frequently rehearsed versions of this argument, for example, 'Valedictory,' *Sunday Times*, 28 December 1952, p. 7, and 'Challenge to the Intellect,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 August 1958, p. 2946, in addition to *The Two Cultures*.
- ⁸ On Snow, Rupert Hall, and the "scientific revolution," see James (2012), 373.
- ⁹ Snow to Putt, 29 [24?] November 1947, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas (HRC): Snow 134.5.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Snow to Putt, 17 February 1948, HRC: Snow 134.5.
- ¹² Johnson to Snow, 11 March 1948, HRC: Snow 111.4.
- ¹³ Snow to Putt, 25 March 1948, HRC: Snow 169.10; Johnson to Snow, 11 March 1948, HRC: Snow 111.4.
- ¹⁴ Snow to Francis King, 18 April, 22 April, 27 October, 1948, HRC: Snow 134.10.
- ¹⁵ 'The MERMAID Proposal,' HRC: Snow 111.4.
- ¹⁶ Johnson to Plumb, 15 May 1948, Cambridge University Library: Plumb Papers, Box 'C. P. Snow + Pam: 1946 to 1968,' File 'Snow 1946 to 1968.'
- ¹⁷ Snow to Johnson, 23 November 1944, in Gryta (1988), 129.
- ¹⁸ Putt to Snow, 20 May 1948, HRC: Snow 169.10.
- ¹⁹ Putt to Snow, 19 June 1948, HRC: Snow 169.10.
- ²⁰ Snow to Philip A. Snow, 22 December 1948, quoted in Philip A. Snow (1982), 100.
- ²¹ Snow to Putt, 19 January 1949, HRC: Snow 134.6. For further discussion of Snow's reviewing practices, see Rabinovitz (1967).
- ²² Snow (1949) (typescript in HRC: Snow 34.2).
- ²³ Snow (1952).
- ²⁴ 'New Novels,' *Spectator*, 14 May 1954, p. 600; 'Snow: Major Road Ahead!' *New Statesman and Nation*, 22 September 1956, pp. 350–352; Gardner (1958).
- ²⁵ Gardner (1958), p. 410, emphasis mine).
- ²⁶ Trilling (1955).
- ²⁷ Snow (1984).
- ²⁸ Trilling (1962).
- ²⁹ Trilling (1955, p. 9).
- ³⁰ Trilling (1962, p. 469).
- ³¹ Colville (1958).
- ³² Churchill College Archives: CCGB 310/1.
- ³³ Churchill College Archives: CCGB 316/1, p. 8.
- ³⁴ Beer (1959).
- ³⁵ 'Scientific and Technical Manpower,' in *A Labour Government and Science: Papers for Mr. Gaitskell*, Royal Society of London MS Blackett E.28.
- ³⁶ HRC: Snow 225.1.
- ³⁷ Snow to Shirley Williams, 7 October 1976, HRC: Snow 210.1.
- ³⁸ On the permissive society: Snow, review of Brian Finney, *Christopher Isherwood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), typescript in HRC: Snow 33.3; on the liberal package deal: Snow to Kingsley Amis, 5 July 1967, HRC: Snow 51.14.
- ³⁹ Snow, review of Melvin Lasky, *Utopia and Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1977), typescript in HRC: Snow 34.7; Snow to Podhoretz, 13 November 1978, HRC: Snow 165.13.
- ⁴⁰ Snow, review of Podhoretz, *Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), *Financial Times*, 16 February 1980.
- ⁴¹ Watkins (1980).

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