

## Human Science or a Human Face? Social History and the “Two Cultures” Controversy

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In May 1963 Peter Laslett, anxious that his research into the social structure of early modern England lacked support in Cambridge, contacted C. P. Snow, a novelist and public figure known to have influence with the foundations that are the lifeblood of fledgling academic enterprises.<sup>1</sup> At the same time Snow was preparing his response to F. R. Leavis’s attack on *The Two Cultures*, eager to shift the ongoing controversy onto what he considered favorable terrain: his optimistic reading of the consequences of the Industrial Revolution. Snow identified Laslett as a potential ally in his public quarrel with Leavis and his private campaign against the New Left, and he moved quickly to secure support for the nascent Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. When Laslett sent him a draft of the first five chapters of *The World We Have Lost* the following year, Snow was delighted: here at last was the new social history, employing the tools of the social sciences to demolish the romantic delusions of his critics.<sup>2</sup> Despite his overall approval, however, Snow was quick to object to the penultimate sentence of Laslett’s first chapter: “Time was when the whole of life went forward in the family, in a circle of loved, familiar faces, known and fondled objects, all to human size.” In

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<sup>1</sup>Snow’s correspondence with Laslett is held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin (hereafter HRC), Snow 132.3. Laslett first solicited Snow’s assistance 18 May 1963.

<sup>2</sup>Snow to Laslett, 5 March 1964, HRC, Snow 132.3.

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this—what was to become one of the most famous lines of historical prose of its era—Snow detected the very nostalgia the new social history promised to eradicate.<sup>3</sup>

This collaboration between Snow and Laslett stands at the intersection of two stories from the 1960s: the development of a scientific style of social history and the “two cultures” controversy.<sup>4</sup> This article argues that this intersection forces the reconsideration of both of these stories, shifting our attention to the political stakes that drove what have since become familiar disciplinary developments. When Snow delivered *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* as the Rede Lecture in Cambridge in 1959, his greatest success was to establish the terms through which commentators analyzed the ensuing controversy: Snow was thus identified as an advocate of the sciences, Leavis as a defender of the humanities, and together they were assigned their places in an argument dating back to T. H. Huxley and

<sup>3</sup> Snow: “I was struck by the closing paragraph of your Chapter I when you talk about a life surrounded by the ‘loved familiar faces.’ This phrase seems to me to pre-judge the emotional experience.” Snow to Laslett, 4 March 1964, HRC, Snow 132.3.

<sup>4</sup> On the “two cultures” (chronologically): Lionel Trilling, “Science, Literature, and Culture: A Comment on the Leavis-Snow Controversy,” *Commentary* 33 (June 1962): 461–77; Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, 1988); Stefan Collini, introduction to C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge, 1993); Roy Porter, “The Two Cultures Revisited,” *Cambridge Review* (November 1994): 74–80; David Hollinger, “Science as a Weapon in *Kulturkampf* in the United States During and After World War II,” *Isis* 86 (1995): 440–54; Ian MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (New York, 1995), chap. 9; D. Graham Burnett, “A View from the Bridge: The Two Cultures Debate, Its Legacy, and the History of Science,” *Daedalus* 128 (Spring 1999): 193–218; David Edgerton, “C. P. Snow as Anti-historian of British Science” (lecture delivered at the British Association for the Advancement of Science [BAAS] meeting, Leeds, 1997 [included in Edgerton’s forthcoming *The Warfare State*]). On new developments in historiography: Adrian Wilson, “A Critical Portrait of Social History,” in *Rethinking Social History: English Society, 1570–1920* (Manchester, 1993), pp. 9–58; Miles Taylor, “The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?” *History Workshop Journal* 43 (Spring 1997): 155–76; Jim Obelkevich, “New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Contemporary British History* 14 (Winter 2000): 125–42, published together with the transcript of a witness seminar on the same theme held at the Institute of Historical Research 29 April 1998; William H. Sewell, Jr., “Whatever Happened to the ‘Social’ in Social History?” in *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, ed. Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates (Princeton, N.J., 2001), pp. 209–26; David Cannadine, “Historians in ‘The Liberal Hour.’” Lawrence Stone and J. H. Plumb Re-visited,” *Historical Research* 75 (August 2002): 316–54; E. J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London, 2002), chap. 17; John Brewer, “New Ways in History, or Talking about My Generation,” *Historiein* (2003): 27–46. David Cannadine discusses both social history and the “two cultures” in “The Age of Todd, Plumb, and Snow: Christ’s, the ‘Two Cultures,’ and the ‘Corridors of Power’” (seminar paper, Institute of Historical Research, March 2003 [forthcoming in a volume on the history of Christ’s College]). I am grateful to Professor Cannadine for providing advance copies of that paper and “Historians in ‘The Liberal Hour.’”

Matthew Arnold.<sup>5</sup> While there is no doubt that the Snow-Leavis episode somehow fits into this longer history, the imposition of that narrative upon their argument presents a number of interpretive problems. First, the very precedents that seem to explain the affair beg the question of how so venerable a quarrel could have generated such hostility in the early 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Second, casting Leavis and Snow as defenders of the arts and sciences, respectively, neglects those points at which they fit uncomfortably, if at all, into their assigned roles. And third, the long historical perspective that depicts the debate in terms of arts-versus-sciences obscures a more salient fault between these antagonists: a clash not of disciplines, but of ideologies.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than adopting Snow's terms to explain the controversy, then, this article takes the dispute as a lens through which to explore a wider political rift. Beneath the arts-versus-sciences language in the debate lay opposing views on progress, history, and society. As a writer and public figure Snow advanced a liberal reading of the progress afforded by industrial civilization; as a university teacher and literary critic Leavis advocated a critical stance against precisely these articles of faith. That these opposing positions were thrown into conflict in the early 1960s is not a surprise: at home it was a time of economic prosperity, when the government had just won an election by reminding the electorate they had never had it so good; abroad it was a time of decolonization, the retreat from imperial administration but not from the assumption that industrial

<sup>5</sup> C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge, 1959). The finest account placing Snow and Leavis in the tradition of Huxley and Arnold remains Trilling, "Science, Literature, and Culture." This perspective informed a contemporary anthology for use in schools: David K. Cornelius and Edwin St. Vincent, eds., *Cultures in Conflict: Perspectives on the Snow-Leavis Controversy* (Chicago, 1964); and it continues to shape historical treatments: see, e.g., Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science*; John de la Mothe, *C. P. Snow and the Struggle of Modernity* (Austin, Tex., 1992); and Collini, introduction to *Two Cultures*. By no means do I intend to deny the analytical utility of that perspective—indeed, I have made use of it myself in "Two Cultures, One University: The Institutional Origins of the 'Two Cultures' Controversy," *Albion* 34 (Winter 2002): 606–24. But in its effort to escape Snow's terms this article is in the company of MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*; and Edgerton, "C. P. Snow as Anti-historian of British Science."

<sup>6</sup> The commentary on the debate is enormous. For a handle on it see Paul Boytinck, *C. P. Snow: A Reference Guide* (Boston, 1980). Collini explores the context that charged the debate in his introduction to the reprint.

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, examination of the "two cultures" episode offers a window onto British intellectual life in the 1960s along the lines of Collini's account of another controversy at another time: "One of those great moral earthquakes of . . . public life whose fault-lines are so revealing of those subterranean affinities and antipathies of the educated classes which the historian's normal aerial survey of the surface cannot detect." Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991), p. 144.

development held the key to prosperity for newly independent states. Critics of the telos of industrial progress that dominated the political discourse of the day thus had to confront the reading of history that underlay it.<sup>8</sup>

This article explores one aspect of that confrontation between advocates and critics of industrialization in their competing efforts to shape the emerging field of social history. In the course of those efforts the appeal to “science,” the need for “objectivity,” and the desire for a “scientific history” appeared repeatedly, but here they are treated less as novel attributes of a new kind of history than as rhetorical weapons employed on behalf of wider political aims.<sup>9</sup> I begin by situating the conflict in the context of the postwar development of historical study, arguing that the confluence of institutional expansion and discipline formation offered the rare opportunity to define a field poised to dominate a generation of research and teaching. Then I trace the development of Snow’s interest in social history from the time of his first comment on the “two cultures” in 1956 to his collaboration with Laslett almost a decade later, showing how he came to graft the prestige of science onto his primary commitment to an optimistic reading of history. Next I examine Leavis’s alternative vision for social history, one that advocated an expertise and methodology contrary to Snow’s but that cannot be understood as antiscientific. Finally, I consider the implications of this episode for our understanding of cultural politics more generally, suggesting that it attests to the need to historicize rather than adopt inherited categories of analysis.

### Social History in the Sixties

History was a booming field when Snow delivered the Rede Lecture of 1959. As the welfare state supplied increasing numbers of students, economic prosperity provided matching resources. The number of students in higher education was in the process of doubling between 1954 and 1966, and in 1963 the Robbins Report promised continuing—indeed, accelerating—growth.<sup>10</sup> As David Cannadine has said, “Undeniably, the period from the late 1940s to the early 1970s was indeed a Golden Age for

<sup>8</sup>This episode is thus one instance in the longer tradition of analyzing the Industrial Revolution in light of contemporary concerns: David Cannadine, “The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution, 1880–1980,” *Past and Present* 103 (May 1984): 131–72.

<sup>9</sup>On “science” as a rhetorical resource in wider political arguments, see Hollinger, “Science as a Weapon in *Kulturkämpfe* in the United States During and After World War II.”

<sup>10</sup>E. J. Hobsbawm, “Growth of an Audience,” *Times Literary Supplement* (7 April 1966), p. 283; Lionel Robbins, *Higher Education*, Cmnd. 2154 (London, 1963).

professional British historians, a time when academe in general was an affluent society, and when Clio in particular had never had it so good.”<sup>11</sup>

At the same time historians in Britain and throughout the West were rethinking the methods and perspectives of their discipline. In France the historians associated with Fernand Braudel and the journal *Annales* were demoting the significance of personalities and political events in favor of the analysis of long-term population trends, climate, and geography. In the United States the “cliometricians” were employing a combination of neoclassical economics, statistical analysis, and data-processing technologies to revisit major questions in American history. And in Britain the scholars affiliated with the Historians’ Group of the Communist Party, including Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill, E. P. Thompson, and E. J. Hobsbawm, fanned out across the centuries to reconfigure the landscape of British history.<sup>12</sup>

The group largely disintegrated following the convulsions in international communism in 1956, but their concern to widen the scope of historical inquiry and reorient its perspective fed the development of social history. Nowhere could that development be better seen than in the pages of the journal they had established, *Past and Present*, which did much to introduce the work of the *Annales* demographers to a British readership and where the debate over the transition from feudalism to capitalism was showcased. There and elsewhere over the course of the 1950s economic history, the history of the poor, and the history of everyday life converged to carve out a more confident place for its increasing numbers of practitioners.<sup>13</sup> By 1960 social history looked to be the most promising area for young historians to enter into, and in 1966 Keith Thomas displayed the confidence of the field when he proclaimed, “The social history of the future will . . . not be a residual subject but a central one, around which all other

<sup>11</sup> David Cannadine, “The State of British History,” *Times Literary Supplement* (10 October 1986), p. 1139.

<sup>12</sup> On the history of historiography, see Georg G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography* (Middletown, Conn., 1975), and *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, 1997); in the United States, Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980); in Britain, Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, N.C., 1997), chap. 1. Taylor points to a non-Marxist heritage of social history in “The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?”; E. J. Hobsbawm recounts the history of the Historians’ Group in “The Historians’ Group of the Communist Party,” *Rebels and Their Causes*, ed. Maurice Cornforth (London, 1978), pp. 21–47.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson traces the tradition of social history from the nineteenth century in “A Critical Portrait of Social History”; E. J. Hobsbawm points out the three trends that fed the field in the 1950s in “From Social History to the History of Society,” *Daedalus* 100 (Winter 1971): 20–45, esp. 21–22.

branches of history are likely to be organized.”<sup>14</sup> John Brewer has recently recalled the appeal of the new trends in history to the generation of university students at this time, trends promising emancipation from Victorian constraints and in sync with the politics of popular culture and Labour revisionism.<sup>15</sup> Social history stood at the vanguard of these trends, its advocates fusing methodological innovations and the rhetoric of modernization to fashion an intellectual juggernaut poised to sweep the field.

This is not to imply anything like unity within the diverse intellectual enterprise that was social history in the 1960s. After all, G. M. Trevelyan’s landmark *English Social History* could hardly have been more different in intent from the work of the Historians’ Group.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the appeal of science was prominent but not unanimous, as attested to by E. P. Thompson’s guarded embrace of the social sciences in a special number of the *Times Literary Supplement* on “new ways in history” in 1966.<sup>17</sup> And the trends generated outright opposition as well: Hugh Trevor-Roper warned of “the creeping paralysis of professionalism” in the armory of journals, conferences, and jargon that attended the growth of the discipline, and Geoffrey Elton labeled many of the new approaches to history so many “false gods.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, rather than the rise of some monolithic “social history,” the early 1960s should be seen as a time of diverse possibilities for a field whose disparate origins and methodological catholicity rendered it attractive to a range of practitioners. Each of these practitioners had the opportunity to influence the methodology, perspective, content—indeed, the very definition—of the subject set to establish the parameters of inquiry for the coming generation. And with the Robbins Report in 1963 stressing the need to double undergraduate places within the next five years, promising increased postgraduate numbers in the social sciences and humanities, and endorsing the establishment of six new universities, the opportunities were not only intellectual but institutional.<sup>19</sup> To adapt a phrase of Trevelyan’s, social history in the 1960s was history with the politics very much in—and it was in this context that Snow, Leavis, and their respective allies advanced their alternative visions for the field.

<sup>14</sup> Keith Thomas, “The Tools and the Job,” *Times Literary Supplement* (7 April 1966), p. 276. The assertion regarding the position of social history in 1960 is that of Lawrence Stone in *The Past and the Present Revisited* (London, 1987), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Brewer, “New Ways in History, or Talking About My Generation.”

<sup>16</sup> G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (New York, 1942).

<sup>17</sup> E. P. Thompson, “History from Below,” *Times Literary Supplement* (6 April 1966), pp. 279–80.

<sup>18</sup> Hugh Trevor-Roper quoted in Thomas, “The Tools and the Job,” p. 276; Geoffrey Elton quoted in Walter Arnstein, ed., *Recent Historians of Great Britain: Essays on the Post-1945 Generation* (Ames, Iowa, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Robbins, *Higher Education*, pp. 259, 279, 284.

### Snow, Laslett, and the Making of a Scientific History

This section explores the origins of Snow's collaboration with Peter Laslett. Their cooperation attests to Snow's interest in establishing history as a social science and would seem to accord with a reading of the "two cultures" as a turf battle between advocates of the arts and the sciences. However, we shall see that Snow's interest in social history predated his association of it with the social sciences. His initial motivation was not to ground history in scientific methodology, but to advance a reading of history in accord with his faith in industrial progress. As the debate attending the "two cultures" developed in the early 1960s, Snow armed this reading of history in the rhetoric of science and modernization, advocating a new social history but never losing sight of his primary aim.

Snow was interested in social history from the time of his first statement on the "two cultures," nearly three years before his Rede Lecture made the phrase famous.<sup>20</sup> In the *New Statesman* in 1956 he observed a division between the arts and sciences, suggesting that the balance of the misfortune lay with those on the arts side who were regrettably unacquainted with the superior morality of their scientific peers. In contrast to the Rede Lecture, there was little on the need to restructure British education and no mention of how the cultural gap hindered the ability of the West to raise the standard of living of the developing world. What was present, however, was the assertion that, while scientists were interested in little of the traditional culture, they were avid readers of social history. By this Snow meant "the sheer mechanics of living, how men ate, built, traveled, worked," and he pointed in particular to the work of Trevelyan.<sup>21</sup> This was history as the whole way of living, and while it may have been devoid of politics, in Snow's hands it was bristling with ideology.

In citing Trevelyan, Snow was referring to the supervisor of his friend J. H. Plumb. Plumb was Snow's junior by six years, and both had successfully navigated the journey from provincial Leicester to Christ's College, Cambridge. From the 1930s through Snow's death in 1980 the two corresponded tirelessly, shared a love of good wines, reviewed each other's work, and exchanged updates on the intrigues of the literary and academic worlds.<sup>22</sup> Plumb had gone to Cambridge in 1933 to become

<sup>20</sup> C. P. Snow, "The Two Cultures," *New Statesman and Nation* (10 October 1956), pp. 413–14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 413.

<sup>22</sup> Cannadine discusses their relationship in "The Age of Todd, Plumb, and Snow." In this article I primarily explore their relationship through the correspondence held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas; further insights will surely be forthcoming from Plumb's papers, recently made available at the University Library in Cambridge.

Trevelyan's only research student, and after working on code-breaking at Bletchley Park during the war he was elected a Fellow of Christ's in 1946. He was at the forefront of social history, having edited *Studies in Social History* in 1955. This volume attests to the harmony at this point between social history and the older tradition of literary history: the dedication praised Trevelyan as one "who for more than fifty years has maintained the tradition that history is literature." To Plumb that tradition of literary historiography flowed directly into the new social history, the field that promised to provide the greatest insights of the coming generation.<sup>23</sup>

Snow and Plumb shared a common political stance, one best understood as a species of liberalism. Both men considered themselves left of center, progressive but not Marxist, and they supported Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson in British politics and John F. Kennedy in America.<sup>24</sup> Reflecting their own journeys from Leicester to Cambridge, the cornerstone of their creed was the individual, and they believed that the best society would enable individuals to realize the potentials set by their merit rather than their class. The program was thus neither traditional conservatism nor egalitarian socialism, and as such it was in sync with the modernizing elements of the Labour Party—of which Snow himself became the symbol when he entered the House of Lords as the Labour government's spokesman for the new Ministry of Technology in 1964.

That liberal political vision was inextricable from their reading (and writing) of history. The year of the debut of the "two cultures" was also that of the first volume of Plumb's landmark *Sir Robert Walpole: Making of a Statesman*.<sup>25</sup> Plumb's dissertation had been written beneath the long shadow of Lewis Namier's influence, but increasingly he came to view his work as a deliberate challenge to Namier and his epigone.<sup>26</sup> Plumb's taste for political and personal narratives ran against the static structural histories of the more conservative Namier, and privately he observed to

<sup>23</sup> J. H. Plumb, ed., *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G. M. Trevelyan* (London, 1955). Plumb on the promise of social history is on p. xiv. On Plumb see David Cannadine, "Sir John Plumb," *History Today* (February 2002), pp. 26–28, in addition to "Historians in 'The Liberal Hour.'"

<sup>24</sup> At the dawn of the 1960s Plumb's politics were thus situated between his more radical youthful stance of the 1930s and the ardent Thatcherism of the 1980s. Snow's journey was similar (if less extreme), and both are typical of the rightward drift of many liberals when confronted with the radicalism of the later 1960s—a phenomenon referred to as "neo-conservatism" in the American context, and one that I intend to explore in more detail in the larger work of which this article is a part.

<sup>25</sup> J. H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole: The Making of a Statesman* (London, 1956).

<sup>26</sup> Cannadine notes the influence of Namier on Plumb's early work, especially his dissertation: J. H. Plumb, "Elections to the House of Commons in the Reign of William III" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1936). Cannadine, "The Age of Todd, Plumb, and Snow."



Snow that “there is a deep resistance in the Namier school to what I am trying to do.” That resistance, he knew, was well-founded: “I stand for something quite different to the Namier school.”<sup>27</sup>

Snow shared Plumb’s hostility to Namierite history because he believed that such a static view of society failed to acknowledge historical progress. Snow believed that modern history was the story of material progress for the vast majority of the British people, progress made possible by the Industrial Revolution. This reading of history as progress, though as the unfolding of material betterment rather than political liberty, might be labeled the “new Whiggery”—and just as the Whigs had had to overcome a succession of Papist, Jacobite, and French threats to English liberty, in the new Whiggery the agents of prosperity were continually beset by a series of reactionary rivals. In 1959 Snow fingered these opponents of material betterment as, somewhat surprisingly, the literary intellectuals of the previous two centuries. Through a series of such tendentious yet rhetorically powerful moves, Snow was advancing a reading of history that reached right up to the present, contrasting a conservative literary culture responsible for Britain’s decline with the progressive scientists who were the nation’s sole hope for renewal.

*The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* was the Sir Robert Rede Lecture in Cambridge in 1959. Snow was then approaching the zenith of his fame as a novelist and public intellectual, and his background as a scientist, administrator, and novelist seemed to uniquely qualify him to address the issue of disciplinary factionalism. As he addressed that topic, however, his historical vision and its political implications were never far from the surface. Snow’s argument in *The Two Cultures* is familiar: Western intellectual life was divided between the two cultures of the arts and the sciences; literary intellectuals had never appreciated the benefits of industrialization in the nineteenth century and stood in the way of harnessing the scientific revolution of the present; yet industrialization was the only way to reduce the gap between the rich and poor nations of the world; if the West failed to act the Soviets surely would; the need to reform British education was therefore immediate. The lecture was widely reprinted and generously praised, and even its critics credited Snow with having identified a problem that demanded attention.<sup>28</sup>

Setting aside questions as to the novelty and merit of Snow’s case, what needs to be stressed here is the ideological nature of its historical vision. Laboring people had welcomed industrialization: “For, with

<sup>27</sup> Plumb to Snow, 19 and 28 April 1956, HRC, Snow 166.6.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview of the subsequent commentary see Boytinck, *C. P. Snow: A Reference Guide*.

singular unanimity, in any country where they have had the chance, the poor have walked off the land into the factories as fast as the factories could take them”; they had benefited accordingly: “Health, food, education; nothing but the industrial revolution could have spread them right down to the very poor”; and the lesson was there for all to see: “For, of course, one truth is straightforward. Industrialization is the only hope of the poor.”<sup>29</sup> Not to accept this characterization was to reveal suspect political sympathies: “The industrial revolution looked very different according to whether one saw it from above or below”; creative writers in particular were incapable of understanding the beneficent consequences of industrialization: “Plenty of them shuddered away... Some, like Ruskin and William Morris and Thoreau and Emerson and Lawrence, tried various kinds of fancies which were not in effect more than screams of horror”; these screams point to an attitude of reactionary incomprehension: “Intellectuals, in particular literary intellectuals, are natural Luddites”; and the successors to these Luddites, the Modernist writers in vogue from 1914, were implicated in the worst crime of the twentieth century: “Didn’t the influence of all they represent bring Auschwitz that much nearer?”<sup>30</sup>

While Snow’s attack was publicly aimed at the supposedly conservative literary culture, in private he directed his animus against the emerging New Left. In 1959 Snow got in touch with Raymond Williams, inquiring into his connections with *Universities and Left Review* and the *New Reasoner* (shortly to amalgamate to become the *New Left Review*). Snow believed that in these idealistic intellectuals he spotted a familiar type: radicals blind to material progress in history who opted out of meaningful political action in the present. In his letter to Williams he differentiated what he took to be their critique of modern society—mere “existential discontent”—from the pragmatic brand of progressive political reform that he favored.<sup>31</sup>

Soon thereafter Norman Podhoretz, a rising star among American liberal intellectuals and the new editor of *Commentary* in New York,

<sup>29</sup> Snow, *The Two Cultures* (1959), pp. 24–26.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21–27. Snow attributed the implication regarding Auschwitz to an unnamed scientific colleague, to which he indicated his agreement by stating that he could not defend the indefensible.

<sup>31</sup> Williams to Snow, 3 December 1959, HRC, Snow 210.1 (inferred from Williams’s reply, as a copy of Snow’s letter is not included in the file). I must stress that this account of the New Left is that of Snow himself. My aim here is not to argue with Snow’s reading of the New Left (or the “two cultures,” or national decline, etc.), but to capture that reading and consider its origins, politics, and consequences. For historical accounts of the New Left, see Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*; and Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals after Stalin* (London, 1995).

pressed Snow for an article about the New Left in Britain.<sup>32</sup> Snow agreed to the idea, but looked to widen its scope to consider progressive politics more generally. This would include the *New Left Review* circle, but not be limited to them: “As you will easily guess,” he told Podhoretz, “I have not much use for a lot of them; politics is not simply, or even mainly, a matter of existential discontent.”<sup>33</sup> When Podhoretz pressed again for the article, Snow’s verdict sharpened: “I shall have to read a certain amount of the more or less half-baked outpourings of the New Left here,” he wrote. “The more I think of them the more hopelessly inept I think they are, and they have about as much relation to real politics as they have to major league baseball.”<sup>34</sup> Snow was especially skeptical of their reading of history, and although he respected Williams and Richard Hoggart, he viewed them as the inheritors of a socialism derived from those archetypal Luddites, Ruskin and Morris—a tradition, he noted privately in 1960, they arrived at through F. R. Leavis.<sup>35</sup>

Snow was right to be wary of Leavis, for in the Richmond Lecture at Downing College in February 1962 the doyen of English criticism delivered a withering assault on *The Two Cultures* and its author. Leavis insisted that Snow was insignificant in himself, a nonentity both as novelist and sage. What was significant, however, was that Snow was taken seriously in both roles. In this way Snow was a portent, the telling product of a coterie world that passed as literary culture in a degenerate civilization. Leavis thus had his own reading of history, one very different from Snow’s (which will be examined in the next section). To be noted here is that Leavis confronted Snow squarely on the ground of history: “[Snow] knows nothing of history,” he insisted. “He has no notion of the changes in civilization that have produced his ‘literary culture.’” Leavis zeroed in on Snow’s reading of industrialization: “Of the human history of the Industrial Revolution, of the human significances entailed in that revolution . . . it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Snow exposes complacently a complete ignorance.” He countered Snow’s assertion that the poor walked eagerly off the land and into the factories: “This, of course, is

<sup>32</sup> Podhoretz, of course, would soon embark on the rightward journey that established him as a leading American neoconservative. See Norman Podhoretz, *Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir* (New York, 1979).

<sup>33</sup> Snow to Podhoretz, 2 February 1960, HRC, Snow 165.10.

<sup>34</sup> Snow to Podhoretz, 9 March 1960, HRC, Snow 165.10.

<sup>35</sup> “Williams and Hoggart are perfectly serious characters, but as you have perceived, most of their kind of socialism derives from Morris and Ruskin seen through the eyes of F. R. Leavis. This means the practical relevance is pretty small. (Williams is a more complex case. He contrived to be a Leavisite and a Marxist at the same time. This gave him a nervous breakdown.)” Snow to Podhoretz, 2 February 1960, HRC, Snow 165.10. Snow eventually dropped the article completely in January 1961. Snow to Podhoretz, 24 January 1961, HRC, Snow 165.11.

mere brute assertion, callous in its irresponsibility. . . . If one points out that the actual history has been, with significance for one's apprehension of the full human problem, incomparably and poignantly more complex than that, Snow dismisses one as a 'natural Luddite.'" He ridiculed the crass materialism that could tolerate such a charge: "The upshot is that if you insist on the need for any other kind of concern, entailing forethought, action, and provision, about the human future—any other kind of misgiving—than that which talks in terms of productivity, material standards of living, hygienic and technological progress, then you are Luddite." Yet Leavis insisted, "I am not a Luddite."<sup>36</sup> The Richmond Lecture amounted to a denunciation of Snow, his credentials, and his thesis—all of which Leavis challenged on the plane of history.

Snow refused to respond to Leavis publicly, claiming that such a base personal assault warranted no response, but in private he was orchestrating his defense. "I think I have got to ask my friends to do some of the fighting for me," he wrote to Plumb two days before Leavis's lecture was published in the *Spectator*. "Can you . . . write a letter to the *Spectator* on the historical points? They are absolute nonsense."<sup>37</sup> Plumb obliged, and three weeks later his letter appeared endorsing Snow's depiction of the poor leaving the land for the factory: "Now, as an historian, I must stress that this is no brute assertion, but is a simple historical fact."<sup>38</sup> Snow kept up the pressure, urging Plumb to take his case on the Industrial Revolution to the airwaves with a broadcast on the BBC.<sup>39</sup> And Plumb worked the case against Leavis into his lectures in Cambridge, as well as in talks to college societies and schoolmasters.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, Snow and Plumb realized that their opponents were arrayed across a wider spectrum. Plumb connected Leavis to Williams and Hoggart, and cast them in the tradition of "the dangerous descendants of the craft-socialists—the Chestertons, Coles, ultimately . . . Morris, who worked to turn time back on industrialization and, as most people do, tried to find an historical justification for their attitude and found it—uncritically—in Barbara and J. L. Hammond."<sup>41</sup> The counterattack, then, was to center on their opponents' intellectual bulwark. Plumb cited the

<sup>36</sup> F. R. Leavis, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow* (London, 1962), pp. 16, 10, 24, 19, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Snow to Plumb, 7 March 1962, HRC, Snow 226.12. The *Spectator* printed Leavis's text on 9 March 1962, and over the next three weeks its correspondence columns were dominated by the debate.

<sup>38</sup> J. H. Plumb, *Spectator* (30 March 1962), p. 396.

<sup>39</sup> Snow to Plumb, 4 July 1962, HRC, Snow 166.9.

<sup>40</sup> Plumb to Snow, 7 December 1962, HRC, Snow 166.9.

<sup>41</sup> Plumb to Snow, 1 July 1962, HRC, Snow 166.9.

authority of the social sciences, particularly anthropology, psychology, and economics, against Leavis's misreading of history.<sup>42</sup> Snow, meanwhile, assured Podhoretz, "The English social historians are getting very tired of what they and I regard as a mis-reading of the eighteenth and nineteenth century social condition here, as performed by the New Left Boys."<sup>43</sup> When Snow revisited the controversy in October 1963, the new social history took center stage.<sup>44</sup>

"The Two Cultures: A Second Look" registered a change in Snow's tactics, from an emphasis on historical interpretation to how that interpretation was to be effected. Snow wrote that he spotted a third culture coming into existence, ranged across a number of fields but all directed toward the factual investigation of human existence: sociology, demography, political science, government, economics, medicine, psychology, architecture—and social history.<sup>45</sup> Their empirical investigations into such problems as the human effects of industrialization—"the fighting point of this whole affair"—required that they be in touch with their scientific colleagues.<sup>46</sup> Snow challenged his critics to produce any evidence of a past golden age and threatened to deploy his newfound allies to root out the truth of the matter: "Where was this Eden? . . . Then the social historians can examine the case."<sup>47</sup> These historians worked in a mode very different from that of Trevelyan, whom Snow had identified with social history in his first statement on the two cultures seven years before. Their history was scientific (if not a science), and Snow cast them as lovers of truth, professionals who analyzed fact rather than sentiment and communicated their findings in the "dry but appallingly eloquent language of statistics."<sup>48</sup> Ranged against them were purveyors of myth, peddlers of lies, advocates of "false social history" who clung to "the stereotypes of fifty years ago."<sup>49</sup> But the tide was with the emerging third culture, and Snow cited in particular the historical demographers in France and Peter Laslett and his colleagues in Britain.

<sup>42</sup> Plumb, *Spectator* (30 March 1962), p. 396.

<sup>43</sup> Snow to Podhoretz, 25 May 1962, HRC, Snow 165.12.

<sup>44</sup> C. P. Snow, "The Two Cultures: A Second Look," *Times Literary Supplement* (25 October 1963), pp. 839–44.

<sup>45</sup> I differ mildly with Collini's characterization of the attention Snow devoted to the social sciences as "a rather feeble attempt to remedy an obvious omission in the original lecture." In the context of Snow's private efforts, the references to the social sciences in "A Second Look" appear more like a deliberate effort to invoke their authority and enlist their support in his wider campaign.

<sup>46</sup> Snow, "A Second Look," p. 840.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 844.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 842.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 843.

Laslett was the driving force behind the most ambitious project in quantitative historical analysis in Britain. He and E. A. Wrigley were shortly to establish the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, setting out to pursue a comprehensive analysis of parish registers throughout Britain to assemble data on fertility, mortality, and marriage patterns for the whole of society from Tudor times to 1837. The project was pioneering in method as well as scope, employing volunteers throughout Britain to assemble the vast quantities of data. Laslett's language when soliciting funding from the Gulbenkian Foundation stressed the scientific pedigree of the project: their study would be "systematic," their technique "statistical." The Cambridge Group was Britain's answer to the *Annales*, employing the latest concepts, techniques, and methodologies to answer questions about social structure before and during industrialization. Moreover, Laslett hoped, the results would filter into academic curricula in Cambridge and beyond.<sup>50</sup>

As he was preparing his response to Leavis, Snow became increasingly interested in Laslett's research. "Do you know Peter Laslett?" he wrote to his friend George Steiner at Churchill College in Cambridge. "I was deeply impressed by his piece in *The Listener* this week. This work looks to me of critical importance."<sup>51</sup> Snow's enthusiasm for Laslett's methodological innovations was of a piece with his ideological stance: "I have been meaning to write to you for some time," he wrote to Laslett a few months later. "I think [your demographic researches] are an essential foundation for any society that you and I and people like us now want."<sup>52</sup> A society, that is, that would acknowledge the reality of material progress, attribute that progress to industrialization, and export it to the developing world. But to effect a transformation in accord with this program, they first had to win the historical argument.

In 1963 the prospects for Snow's new allies in the Cambridge Group were tenuous. When Snow urged Laslett to drive his research students forward, Laslett replied that he wished he could but all he had was a library assistant and three amateur volunteers. They were, however, applying for a grant from the Gulbenkian Foundation, and he hoped they could use Snow as a reference.<sup>53</sup> Early the next year, the application stood at a critical juncture: while Laslett understood that they were on the verge of receiving a grant of £5,000, they actually needed something like three times that

<sup>50</sup> Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, UK Branch, London, Annual Report for 1964, entry 43.

<sup>51</sup> Snow to Steiner, 7 February 1963, HRC, Snow 191.4.

<sup>52</sup> Snow to Laslett, 20 May 1963, HRC, Snow 132.3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*; Laslett to Snow, 27 May 1963, HRC, Snow 132.3.

amount. Might Snow intervene? “For if we fail with the Gulbenkian now,” Laslett wrote, “it will be at least six months before we can screw up another Foundation to the point Thornton has now reached and by then I may have lost the support of my volunteer assistants, and the university may well have decided that the lack of Foundation support demonstrates that the project is no good.”<sup>54</sup>

Snow replied by insisting that it was in the public interest that the Cambridge Group receive the resources they required.<sup>55</sup> Anticipating a Labour victory in the pending election, he had already offered to introduce Laslett to Richard Crossman.<sup>56</sup> Now he wrote personally to the secretary of the Gulbenkian Foundation, and suggested to Laslett that he might be able to drum up some money from America.<sup>57</sup> The recourse to American money proved unnecessary, however: in June 1964 Laslett informed Snow that the Gulbenkian Foundation had awarded the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure £8,000—not as much as they might have hoped for, but enough to establish them in Cambridge.<sup>58</sup>

The first product of that research was Laslett’s landmark portrait of preindustrial English society, *The World We Have Lost*.<sup>59</sup> Laslett translated mountains of data into graceful prose, addressing in ten chapters such questions as the nature of English society before industry, life in a village community, and whether the peasants really starved. He demonstrated that in early modern England families tended to be nuclear rather than extended, marriages occurred relatively late in life, and populations evidenced unexpected mobility.

At the same time, Laslett confronted rivals on two fronts: Marxists and “impressionist” historians. He had announced the death of “class” as a viable category of analysis as long ago as 1958, remarking with approval in *Encounter* that “class is on the way out for historians: it is going fast, and faster among the English economic historians than anywhere else.”<sup>60</sup> By 1965 his impatience with Marxist history was total. In *The World We Have Lost* he again denied the utility of “class,” dismissed “alienation” as

<sup>54</sup> Laslett to Snow, 28 February 1964, HRC, Snow 132.3.

<sup>55</sup> Snow to Laslett, 5 March 1964, HRC, Snow 132.3.

<sup>56</sup> Snow to Laslett, 20 May 1963, HRC, Snow 132.3.

<sup>57</sup> Snow to Laslett, 5 March 1964, HRC, Snow 132.3.

<sup>58</sup> Laslett to Snow, 4 June 1964, HRC, Snow 132.3.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1965). Laslett stated in the introduction that the book was not a publication of the Cambridge Group, but the identification of the book with the work of the Cambridge Group was unavoidable. See, e.g., the review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (9 December 1965) (discussed below).

<sup>60</sup> Peter Laslett, “Engels as Historian,” *Encounter* (May 1958), pp. 85–86.

so much twentieth-century cant, insisted that the English Revolution was nothing like a social revolution, and proposed that the relevant historical division was not between feudalism and capitalism but between preindustrial and industrial society. The new empirical history was dispensing at last with the Marxist framework: “It would, if it were possible, be far better to lay ‘The Rise of the Gentry’ carefully alongside ‘The Rise of the Middle Classes,’ and to place them reverently together in the great and growing collection of outmoded historians’ idiom.”<sup>61</sup>

Impressionist historians (those who relied on literary rather than quantitative evidence) fared no better at Laslett’s hands. Instead of relying upon misleading snippets of fictional evidence, demographic analysis promised to ground conclusions on the basis of fact. On the question of the average age of brides, for instance, “[The evidence] decidedly does not confirm the impression made by Shakespeare and the other literary sources. Their evidence must be called systematically deceptive in this matter. It is best to look at the facts in a table.”<sup>62</sup>

Tables, facts, demography: *The World We Have Lost* announced the arrival of the new era of historical science. At last dispensing with outmoded Marxist categories and misleading literary evidence, history was to take its place alongside statistics, economics, sociology, anthropology, and even genetics.<sup>63</sup> And while the book’s title is easily taken to suggest mournful regret for a lost golden age, Laslett insisted that only one conclusion was possible regarding life before the Industrial Revolution: “The coming of industry cannot be shown to have brought economic oppression and exploitation along with it. It was there already.”<sup>64</sup> In the world we had lost, Laslett made clear, infant mortality was higher, life expectancy shorter, living harsher—and only the coming of industry made possible the improvements enjoyed in the twentieth century.<sup>65</sup>

Snow was delighted when he received that draft of the first five chapters of *The World We Have Lost*, reading and rereading it and writing Laslett twice in two days. “It is a remarkable achievement, and will transform the whole of this kind of study,” he wrote. “I am lost in admiration.”<sup>66</sup> Here was the emerging “third culture” that he had fostered privately and staked his case on publicly, employing the tools of the social sciences against his twin rivals of Marxism and literary romanticism. Yet

<sup>61</sup> Laslett, *The World We Have Lost*, p. 168.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126, 94, 45.

<sup>66</sup> Snow to Laslett, 5 March 1964, HRC, Snow 132.3.



Snow's challenge to Laslett's conclusion to that first chapter is a reminder of his priorities: despite the scientific rhetoric, methodological innovations, and modernizing appeal, Snow's interest in the new social history in 1964 derived from the same impulse as his favorable reference to the old social history eight years before. A scientific social history was not an end, but a means to an end: it was the trojan horse that would carry a liberal reading of industrial progress into classrooms and lecture halls throughout Britain.

### Leavis's Alternative Social History

The *Times Literary Supplement* of 9 December 1965 featured a knockabout critique of *The World We Have Lost*.<sup>67</sup> Entitled "The Book of Numbers," the review opened by declaring, "The engagement has been long announced, but some will be surprised to learn that the marriage between History and Sociology has already been solemnized. . . . *The World We Have Lost* is a manifesto of the new science."<sup>68</sup> It mocked Laslett's scientific pretensions, confronted him squarely on the ground of method, and endorsed a social history that included literary as well as quantitative evidence. Laslett's failing was not that he adopted the demographic techniques of French historians, but that he did so in a slipshod manner: "The new science gives rise to statements about social structure which are, too often, bathetic or wholly imprecise."<sup>69</sup> Laslett was accused of "guessing a little," excoriated for his "unsatisfactory manner of treating scanty data," and chastised for his failure to employ "expertise" and "objectivity" in handling evidence.<sup>70</sup> The tables were confusing, the documentation thin, and the text in need of proofreading. The critique thus targeted the precision upon which Laslett based his authority. It was not an attack upon social history, but a call for a different kind of social history—one that neither exaggerated claims for quantitative evidence nor dismissed literary evidence. The anonymous reviewer was E. P. Thompson.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup> "The Book of Numbers," *Times Literary Supplement* (9 December 1965), pp. 1117–18.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1117.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1118.

<sup>71</sup> TLS, the Times Literary Supplement Centenary Archive, <http://www.tls.psmedia.com/>. Not surprisingly, given Thompson's distinctive prose, E. A. Wrigley recalls that the identity of the author of the review was soon common knowledge. I am grateful to Professor Wrigley for the assistance he provided regarding Laslett and the early history of the Cambridge Group (although the responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation is mine).

Thompson pointed out that *The World We Have Lost* was written for an audience that included Lord Snow, and this was not the first time that Thompson had brushed up against Snow. The Rede Lecture had been reprinted and discussed in successive issues of *Encounter*—the CIA’s monthly journal of politics and culture, established and secretly funded to shore up Western liberalism vis-à-vis Marxism in the Cold War.<sup>72</sup> While commentators in those pages attended to the grave problem of how to mend the gap between the arts and sciences, however, Thompson saw through the ostensible differences between the “two cultures” to recognize the political stakes buried within Snow’s formulation: “Herod (the liberal) is never more boring than when he appears in the guise of the ameliorative man of science,” he wrote in 1960. “Hence that schizophrenic feature of Natopolitan ideology, the ‘two cultures’: the one a vast Cain armed with the Bomb, the other an acquiescent, pietistic Abel, baring his genteel hair-shirt for the blow.”<sup>73</sup> Three years later, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson sided with Leavis in a tactical foray into the debate: “When Sir Charles Snow tells us that ‘with singular unanimity . . . the poor have walked off the land into the factories as fast as the factories could take them’, we must reply, with Dr. Leavis, that the ‘actual history’ of the ‘full human problem [was] incomparably and poignantly more complex than that’.”<sup>74</sup> With his belief in participatory democracy, Thompson would have had little sympathy for Snow’s centralizing, bureaucratic, and technocratic tendencies. And Thompson and Leavis certainly shared certain literary and intellectual affinities—Thompson’s English teacher at school had been influenced by Leavis, and Thompson himself read English at Cambridge following the war.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, in

<sup>72</sup> C. P. Snow, “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution,” *Encounter* (June 1959), pp. 17–24, and (July 1959), pp. 22–27; Walter Allen et al., “A Discussion of C. P. Snow’s Views,” *Encounter* (August 1959), pp. 67–73; Michael Polanyi, “The Two Cultures,” *Encounter* (September 1959), pp. 61–64; Julian Symons, “‘Two Cultures,’ One Missing” (letter), *Encounter* (September 1959), pp. 83–84; C. H. Waddington, “Humanists and Scientists: A Last Comment on C. P. Snow,” *Encounter* (January 1960), pp. 72–73; C. P. Snow, “The ‘Two Cultures’ Controversy: Afterthoughts,” *Encounter* (February 1960), pp. 64–68; Julian Huxley, “The Two Cultures and Education” (letter), *Encounter* (June 1960), pp. 91–93; Kathleen Nott, “The Type to Which the Whole Creation Moves? Further Thoughts on the Snow Saga,” *Encounter* (February 1962), pp. 87–88, 94–97. The story of *Encounter* is brilliantly told by Frances Stonor Saunders in *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London, 1999).

<sup>73</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Outside the Whale,” *Out of Apathy* (London, 1960), p. 157.

<sup>74</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), p. 445.

<sup>75</sup> E. P. Thompson, *Making History: Writings on Politics and Culture* (New York, 1994), p. 254. Fred Inglis recalls that Thompson once said of Leavis, “it would be good to have fought some of his battles alongside him”—the suggestion here is that, in the case of the “two cultures,” he did. Inglis, introduction to E. P. Thompson, *Collected Poems* (Newcastle, 1999), p. 15.

an argument in which the primary axis of disagreement was political, Thompson and Leavis made for very strange bedfellows indeed: how did they find themselves aligned against Snow and a scientific social history?

From his base in the English School Leavis advanced an alternative social history. The sources for understanding social conditions and historical change were not parish registers but great writers, and the historian must pay close attention to this incomparable body of evidence. In Leavis's antimaterialist worldview, literature provided an index to the state of the language of the day, language enabled thought, and thought was an act of creation that to Leavis was life. Literature thus provided the essential point of entry into assessing the state of any civilization, and (pace the common association of Leavis with the New Critics) by studying its literature the historian would necessarily be led to wider questions: "What, as a civilization to live in and be of, did England offer at such and such a time? As we pass from now to then, what light is thrown on human possibilities—on the potentialities and desirabilities of civilized life? In what respects might it have been better to live then than now? What tentative conception of an ideal civilization are we prompted towards by the hints we gather from history?"<sup>76</sup> To attend to these questions the historian required a different sort of expertise from the statisticians: the ability to read. The historian thus had to be in close contact with the English School that was to stand at the heart of the university.

Leavis frequently revisited the question of what social history should be in the decade following his critique of Snow. Having retired from his post in Cambridge in 1962, he embarked on a phase of "higher pamphleteering": a series of lectures in which he reiterated the case against Snow, opposed the expansion of the universities, and put forward his alternative vision for the university.<sup>77</sup> The English School would stand at the center of that university, serving as a liaison center for students and scholars in every other discipline. He used the case of social history to illustrate the ideal working relationship between literary and historical studies: in lectures at Cornell and Harvard in 1966 he insisted that Dickens, as a great novelist, was in fact a great social historian.<sup>78</sup> In his Clark Lectures at Cambridge the following year he extended the line of novelist-social historians to include the great novelists from Dickens to Lawrence, illustrating the novelist's insight by countering Snow's claim that the poor eagerly left the land for the

<sup>76</sup> F. R. Leavis, "Sociology and Literature," *Scrutiny* 13 (Spring 1945): 80.

<sup>77</sup> F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, *Lectures in America* (London, 1969); F. R. Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword* (London, 1972).

<sup>78</sup> F. R. Leavis, "Luddites? There Is Only One Culture," in *Nor Shall My Sword*, p. 81.

factories with a quotation from Thomas Hardy: “This process, which is described by the statistician as the tendency of the rural population to the large towns, is really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced.”<sup>79</sup>

But Leavis was not encouraged when he surveyed social history over the course of the 1960s. Writing in *Scrutiny* in 1945, he had been critical of Trevelyan for his tendency to use literature as an ornament rather than a central source, but he nevertheless read Trevelyan with gratitude and referred to his work with respect.<sup>80</sup> Trevelyan showed the potential for social history to be the study of civilization, even as his inadequate use of literary evidence illustrated the need to reconfigure the relationship between literature and history. The trend in the next generation, however, was disheartening: Plumb, for instance, was lambasted for siding with Snow on the question of industrialization, and by the early 1970s he had earned a minor place in the litany of the enlightened whom Leavis ridiculed for their complacent reading of historical progress.<sup>81</sup> Harold Perkin ran afoul as well: although Leavis used evidence from *The Origins of Modern English Society* (1969) to refute Snow and Plumb on the issue of the migration into the factories, he also chastised the first professor of social history in England for being “uncritically enthusiastic” toward the Industrial Revolution.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Q. D. Leavis took Perkin as an exemplar of the failings of an historian that privileged “facts” and the writings of journalists and assorted cranks above the writers of the day.<sup>83</sup> As Leavis wrote in 1965, such historians neglected literary evidence at their peril: “A study of human nature is a study of social human nature, and the psychologist, sociologist, and social historian aren’t in it compared with the great novelists.”<sup>84</sup>

In this way, Leavis’s critique of social history was one part of his wider argument against the social sciences. Leavis had been at the forefront of the sociological approach to literary study in the 1930s, building off of Q. D. Leavis’s *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932).<sup>85</sup>

<sup>79</sup> F. R. Leavis, *English Literature in Our Time and the University* (London, 1969), pp. 170, 174, and “Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope,” in *Nor Shall My Sword*, p. 187.

<sup>80</sup> Leavis, “Sociology and Literature,” pp. 74–81.

<sup>81</sup> F. R. Leavis, “Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope,” and “Elites, Oligarchies and an Educated Public” (lectures delivered in 1970 and 1971, respectively, at the University of York and published in *Nor Shall My Sword*).

<sup>82</sup> Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880* (London, 1969); Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword*, pp. 193–95.

<sup>83</sup> Q. D. Leavis to D. F. Pockock, 10 August 1971, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, 9.59.121.24.

<sup>84</sup> F. R. Leavis, “Anna Karenina,” appearing originally in the first number of the *Cambridge Quarterly* in 1965 and reprinted in *Anna Karenina and Other Essays* (London, 1967).

<sup>85</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London, 1932); Ian MacKillop, *Were That Cambridge: F. R. Leavis and the “Anthropologico-Literary” Group* (Austin, Tex., 1993).

For the next two decades *Scrutiny* had continued to relate literary production to the society that sustained (or inhibited) it, but in the postwar decades Leavis was increasingly contemptuous toward the scientism of sociology, psychology, and linguistics. By wrapping themselves in the language and pretensions of the sciences, these social scientists were cutting themselves off from the insights of poets and novelists for the sake of a bogus and undesirable objectivity. They were consequently blind to the fact that Blake was a great psychologist, just as Dickens had been the supreme social historian.<sup>86</sup> Especially menacing was the contention of Robbins that, in the era of expanding universities, the humanizing complement to the natural sciences was to be provided by these very social sciences.<sup>87</sup> To Leavis, this meant the marginalization of the pursuit that sustained life itself.

Yet despite his hostility to the social sciences, the “two cultures” dichotomy of arts versus sciences explains Leavis’s position no better than it does Snow’s: Leavis’s critique was directed not against science but the social. Snow had opposed the condition of the individual, ultimately tragic because doomed to die a solitary death, with that of society, for which there was the hope of material betterment. To Leavis, this erection of a dichotomy between the individual and the social drained the latter of life and rendered it an inert mechanism, an aggregate to be manipulated by technocrats such as Snow and Robbins. On the contrary, Leavis conceived of the “social” as the meeting of individual minds in what he called the “third realm” or “human world.” This meeting was made possible by language, the inheritance of generations of creative human collaboration. It was that collaboration that made further creative thought possible, building on the living language and transmitting it through time.

In the seventeenth century, however, disaster struck. In positing a reality distinct from human creation, Descartes drove a wedge into the unity of language and thought. Thought was henceforth conceived of not as creation, but as the striving of a mind toward some knowable reality; reality was no longer the result of creative human collaboration, but something already existing “out there” in nature. The language of the Royal Society, esteeming clarity and logic and striving toward mathematical precision, testified to the ethos of the new civilization: language—that which made thought possible—was now conceived of as its impediment, an obstacle to be circumvented through abstraction. The unified, organic

<sup>86</sup> Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword*, p. 17.

<sup>87</sup> The menace of Robbins is a theme in F. R. Leavis, *English Literature in Our Time and the University* (London, 1969), *Nor Shall My Sword*, and *The Living Principle* (London, 1975).

culture which had sustained the living language and made Shakespeare possible was fractured. The march of civilization drove this process relentlessly forward, until the Industrial Revolution finally destroyed all but the last vestiges of the organic culture and the language that it had sustained.

Leavis's hostility to the "social," then, derived from his radical critique of modern civilization itself. This is why, despite fundamental political differences, Leavis and Thompson stood together in their hostility to Snow and *The Two Cultures*. Leavis's ideology was predicated upon an idealized past, and in the 1960s he defiantly advocated an elite university against the democratic tide; Thompson was a democratic socialist who campaigned for a socialist transformation, placing his faith in the people of England past and present. But both of them recognized that Snow's case rested upon his liberal faith in the progress brought about by industrialization, and so their critiques closed in around him at once from the left and the right.

### Conclusion: From the Science of History to the History of Science

By 1970 Snow's hopes for social history had been dashed. In his final major statement on the "two cultures" he lamented that the questions he had raised a decade ago remained unanswered.<sup>88</sup> History seemed to have slipped out of the conceptual net, and historians to have rejected progress as a vulgar concept. In a lecture at the University of Texas he expanded on this point, declaring that he had come to learn that history differed from science in that it was not "automatically progressive."<sup>89</sup> While science could not help but show the direction of time's arrow, professional historians had lost track of any semblance of narrative. Instead of validating a grand and triumphant historical vision, contemporary historiography seemed content with the production of detailed studies of marginal significance.

At the same time, however, Snow identified a new field in which to invest his hopes: the history of science. A decade before Snow had suggested that the history of science might function as a bridge between the two cultures, but by 1970 his interest in the field had shifted along lines reminiscent of his earlier interest in social history: now the history of science promised not to bridge a cultural divide, but to serve as a refuge for

<sup>88</sup> C. P. Snow, "The Case of Leavis and the Serious Case," *Times Literary Supplement* (9 July 1970), pp. 737–40.

<sup>89</sup> C. P. Snow, "The Role of Personality in Science," British Library, National Sound Archive, cassette ICA0012643.

the reading of progress in history.<sup>90</sup> After all, Snow said, due to its subject matter the history of science could not possibly join in the modish hostility to narrative. So in the early 1960s Snow had backed a scientific social history in the confidence that it would bear out his progressive reading of history, and in 1970 his attention shifted to the history of science for the very same reason.<sup>91</sup> In each case Snow hoped to realize his liberal vision in disciplinary form, and in each case the discipline and its methodology was secondary to this primary objective.

This article has thus aimed to recast the terms through which both the “two cultures” controversy and the emergence of the new social history are understood. It is not surprising that the 1960s were characterized by discussions of “two cultures,” the rise of the social sciences, and a modernizing zeitgeist, and my aim has not merely been to show that these and other developments were related. Instead, I have sought to disentangle the knot of disciplinary and political concerns at work in these developments in order to assign causation to the latter.<sup>92</sup> The debate attending the Rede Lecture provided the occasion, the rivalry between the arts and the sciences the language, and social history the terrain, for a conflict that was at root ideological. That conflict played out in part in the form of competing efforts, public and private, to establish the methodology and content of the new social history. In the context of university expansion and disciplinary fluidity, the chance to shape the emerging field represented nothing less than the opportunity to translate political ideals into institutional forms. In the course of these efforts the language and prestige of the social sciences loomed large—not solely as the methodological preference of optimistic historians, but as a rhetorical weapon employed by advocates of diverse intellectual and ideological positions.

Nevertheless, Snow’s depiction of the “two cultures” as a rift between the arts and the sciences continues to structure conceptions of that debate, of twentieth-century history, and of contemporary culture—witness the recent symposium at the Royal Society on precisely this theme.<sup>93</sup> And just as the argument between Huxley and Arnold was invoked to

<sup>90</sup> C. P. Snow, “Recent Thoughts on the Two Cultures,” address at Birkbeck College (London), 12 December 1961, British Library, WP 8944/39.

<sup>91</sup> Undoubtedly the antiteleological and antifoundational aspects of the historiography of science in the subsequent three decades would have frustrated Snow yet again.

<sup>92</sup> Although beyond the scope of this article, a similar argument might be considered in the context of American historiography—the revealing debate in that case being that which attended the publication of Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, 1974).

<sup>93</sup> C. P. Snow, “Meeting the Challenges of the Future: A Discussion between ‘The Two Cultures’” (symposium at the Royal Society [London], 13–14 May 2002).

explain the debate between Snow and Leavis, so too have Snow and the “two cultures” been appropriated to make sense of such affairs as the “science wars” of the 1990s.<sup>94</sup> I have argued here that Snow’s categories are inadequate—indeed, misleading—in attempting to understand the locally charged and historically specific debate of the early 1960s (much less those of the 1880s or 1990s). Yet the continuing recourse to these terms results in the misunderstanding of the Snow-Leavis episode—a misunderstanding that obscures the relationship between politics, culture, and knowledge past as well as present.

<sup>94</sup> For example, Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* (New York, 1998), pp. 183, 268, 276–77.



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