

To Hell With Culture: Fascism, Rhetoric, and the War for Democracy

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To Hell With Culture was Herbert Read's most concise exposition of his aesthetic politics, but it was a work moulded by the particular context in which he wrote. Starting life as a contribution to a series of pamphlets pondering the shape of Britain in the aftermath of the Second World War, Read drew on a deep reading of socialist intellectual history to plot a new, radical path for democracy. His text was a necessary utopia, presenting an outcry against the cultural barbarities of both the capitalist and totalitarian superpowers, and entering a battle of ideas to determine the shape of post-war Europe.

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Cordite and brute economic capacity may have truly decided the outcome of the Second World War, but many are keen to stress that the more urbane skills of rhetoric played their part too. In the recent rush by British politicians to associate themselves with Winston Churchill's legacy, on the occasion of the half centenary since he made his final journey from Westminster Hall to a burial plot in the village of Bladon in Oxfordshire, this emphasis on the power of words to shape the course of history was very much in evidence. 'He knew Britain was not just a place on the map but a force in the world with...a duty to stand up for freedom', said David Cameron, delivering a memorial address in Westminster Hall flanked by a statue of Churchill striking a familiarly truculent pose. Born the year after Churchill's death, Cameron began his hagiography by noting that it was Churchill's oratory that 'made a big impression on me as a boy', after discovering a long forgotten cache of vinyl records preserving his wartime speeches. And the object of this eloquence, he concluded, retained its value in a radically different historical context: 'With every affront to freedom in this century, we must remember that courage and resolve in the last century'.¹

Louis Adeane would not have agreed. In 1950, as Adeane was busy at work on a long-delayed and ultimately never completed study of the anarchist poet and cultural critic Herbert Read, he reacted angrily to a fawning review of Churchill's first volume of war memoirs by Isaiah Berlin in *The Cornhill Magazine*. Writing to his friend George Woodcock, Adeane, whose real name was the rather less beguiling Donald Potter, complained that Berlin's exegesis rested on an unfair reading of Read's 1928 work *English Prose Style*, in which he had taken issue with the 'false' and 'artificial' eloquence of Churchill's *The World Crisis* (1923-31).² To Berlin's mind, Read's antagonism was a direct product of his 'disillusion with the false splendours of the Edwardian era', pious verities found wanting in the Gehenna of the First World War.³ Where Read was wont to dismiss Churchillian rhetoric as 'so much tinsel and hollow pasteboard', Berlin believed that this was mistaken and that it was 'in reality solid':

In 1940 he assumed an indomitable stoutness, an unsundering quality on the part of his people, and carried on...So hypnotic was the force of his words, so strong his faith, that by the sheer intensity of his eloquence he bound his spell upon them until it seemed to them that he was indeed speaking what was in their hearts and minds. Doubtless it was there; but largely dormant until he had awoken it within them.⁴

Adeane had no time for this. 'Berlin's essay brings out very clearly that the windy old frog stands for everything of which we are ashamed', he wrote to Woodcock. 'I get so angry when I think of Churchill', he confessed, 'of that inflated babyhood, that I become babyish myself, full of a kind of incoherent stifled rage'.⁵

As loud as the echo of Churchill's oratory may still be, and while historians may continue to eulogise his 'words that stood up and fought', Adeane reminds us that his was far from being the only voice struggling to be heard in the battle of ideas generated by the Second World War.⁶ Contributing to this din was a series of books under the editorship of Francis Williams, former editor of the *Daily Herald* and future press advisor to Clement Attlee. The series, entitled 'The Democratic Order' was intended, Williams wrote, as a weapon in the 'war of ideas', noting that it was pressing 'not simply to destroy the military power Germany but to defeat the philosophy and idea of Naziism (sic)'. In so doing, he continued, it took seriously Churchill's statement that the post-war world would be one of opportunity, in which the 'forward march of the common people' would continue unchecked, finally realising the postponed promise of reconstruction that had caused such ennui in the aftermath of the First World War. The purpose of Williams' pamphlets was therefore to think through the 'new democratic order', and the 'practical steps necessary in economic affairs, finance, industry and agriculture, in political policy, education and the social services' that would prepare the ground for its arrival. Into this fray stepped Herbert Read, offering a contribution examining the 'place of "culture" in the Democratic Order'. This pamphlet was, in turn, a concise statement of his aesthetic politics, and adopted a title strikingly different from the rest of Williams' muted series: *To Hell With Culture*.

'In the Plenitude of Freedom': The Culture of Democracy

Joining Read in the ranks of 'The Democratic Order' imprint was a motley collection of left-leaning academics, journalists and critics. Williams' own contribution, *What Are We Fighting For? A Call to Britain* (1941) argued that 'when Britain went to war for the principles of democracy against those of National Socialism she, as the Americans say, started something'. That something, he added, amounted to Britain 'becom[ing] a symbol of democracy in the world', which meant that the time was also ripe to offer a radical reinterpretation of the meaning of this vexed political term that might inspire action elsewhere. Admitting, but brushing over, the fact that Britain's imperial project rather tarnished its claim to be the champion of a new democracy, his solution was to enact a number of policies that would mitigate economic and social inequality. In large part this pre-empted many of the findings of the Beveridge Report that appeared the following year, captivating public attention and selling 100,000 copies in its first month of publication alone – an unlikely achievement for a government report dwelling on the 'mechanics of social security.'⁷ Williams insisted that an agreed 'minimum of food, clothing and decent housing' was the first necessity, and then called for an end to economic inequality; the abolition of mass unemployment; accommodation for those de-housed by the Blitz; to 'set afoot a great agricultural development scheme'; and resolve inequality of opportunity in education. In short, Williams' presented a Disraelian demand to 'break down the social barriers that divide the British people into two nations and make them one nation', a project he deemed a 'new democratic revolution'.⁸

The sixty-four pages Williams' gave himself granted little room to expand on these bold if vague plans, but other writers in the series used their allocation to examine particular facets of this

democratic revolution. Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, for instance, turned to the role of the Church, and calling for a 'new reformation' saw in religion a hope for the '*limitation of political authority which democracy demands*'. Christianity, he concluded, must 'cease to function as a conservative religion', and become a 'revolutionary religion', now allied to the pulsating demand for truly democratic governance.⁹ More ponderously, Douglas Jay, fresh from a spell working for *The Economist*, explored the issue of the war's cost. Mirroring Williams' pamphlet, Jay presented the war as a time pregnant with the possibilities of renewal, and proposed that the biggest issue in 'devising our economic policy' was to address the 'fantastic and indefensible inequalities of wealth and income which disgraced even democratic society in the years before the present war'. To wage war Jay proposed 'heavy taxation' and price controls, and to wage peace, once Europe awoke from the 'long Nazi nightmare', he called for a Keynesian policy of 'Big Government loans' to subsidise deploying demobilised labour to work on reconstruction schemes and low taxes to spark spending.¹⁰ The autarkic thinker and pioneer environmentalist Sir George Stapledon echoed the insistence that post-war 'nothing must be allowed to be quite the same again', looking to a repudiation of the profit motive and renewed contact with the discipline of farming as the foundation of a new Britain with a robust agricultural sector.¹¹

Read's pamphlet therefore sat alongside a number of distinguished commentators, all, despite divergences of vision and method, united in the belief that rethinking the nature of democracy was crucial in the struggle against fascism, but also in the effort to rebuild Britain once the shooting stopped. This is an important context for understanding Read's rhetorical efforts in *To Hell With Culture*, for while the pamphlet amounted to a succinct exposition of his aesthetically-inflected anarchism, its origins were clearly less sectarian than this might imply. When, for instance, he turned to highlight the depth of the democratic current in Western intellectual history, he pointed to a melange of thinkers – 'Rousseau, Jefferson, Lincoln, Proudhon, Owen, Ruskin, Marx, Morris, Kropotkin' – as its key theorists.¹² While this was a haphazard list, it served a purpose in pointing to a tradition of thinking that was both accepted as foundationally democratic (Rousseau, Jefferson, Lincoln), but also inherently radical (Proudhon, Owen, Ruskin, Marx, Morris, Kropotkin). Just as the intellectual depth of this tradition demonstrated that it was more than a match for the 'simple-minded and slow-witted' apostles of fascism, Read's argument pointed to a far more radical reimagining of this democratic potential than that countenanced by his fellow authors.¹³

In developing such an argument, it becomes clear that as an exercise in deliberative rhetoric, Read's primary object was not to rally the diffident to protect Britain's imperilled democracy, but to persuade his readers that democracy meant something else entirely. Turning to Walt Whitman's sprawling 1871 text *Democratic Vistas*, he quoted approvingly Whitman's line that despite the verbiage vented in the name of 'Democracy', it was 'a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted.' While the imprimatur of *To Hell With Culture* was the notion that the Second World War was, in Francis' words, a fight 'for the survival and future of democracy', Read's position was that this system had never 'been put into practice'.¹⁴ This belied the 'absurd' argument promulgated 'by Fascists and Nazis...that democracy is a system that has been tried and has failed', but it also cautioned against accepting Churchill's anodyne image of the 'Great Democracies' united against the Nazi menace.¹⁵ Real democracy had never been practised, Read added, because it rested on three conditions:

The first...is that all production should be for use, and not for profit.

The second...is that each should give according to his ability, and each receive according to his needs.

The third...is that the workers in each industry should collectively own and control that industry.¹⁶

The promise of these principles, Read concluded, was not just a meaningful democracy, but the achievement of the 'higher values of life'.¹⁷

While all of the 'Democratic Order' pamphlets hinted at the necessity of socialism – morally as an antidote to the inequalities nurtured by capitalism, and practically as the most efficient mode of organisation in the modern world – Read's vision was more radical. As he moved on to examine these three foundational principles in *To Hell With Culture*, he demonstrated both the solid roots his argument had in the history of socialism, but also its particular refinement in Read's hands in an age of competing totalitarianisms. In pursuing this argument, he also shifted from the Aristotelian *pathos* that was the natural metier for a thinker committed to recovering the romantic impulse as a touchstone for modernism, to *logos*, appealing to the power of reason that was more in tune with the ethos of Williams' series.¹⁸

Read therefore started by outlining the case for 'production for use', an idea that he identified as the *sine qua non* of the 'economic doctrine of socialism'. His argument was on the surface conventionally Marxist, highlighting the role of capitalism in 'key[ing] up the machinery of production to unimagined levels', to the point where humanity had benefitted 'from the resulting plethora'. Rather than tracing this argument through to its historical materialist conclusion that this refinement of technology was a prerequisite of communistic distribution, Read spotlighted instead the inferiority of the products created under capitalist economic relations. 'Take the case of the chair you are sitting on as you read this pamphlet', he suggested:

It may be one of three things: (1) a decent well-made chair inherited from your great-great-grand-mother; (2) a decent well-made chair which you bought at an expensive shop; or (3) an indifferent, uncomfortable chair, shabby after a year's use, which was the best you could afford.¹⁹

The problem encapsulated in this example, he continued, was that the internal logic of capitalism was to continually debase good design. As chairs must be manufactured to 'suit every kind of purse', and given that furnishing a home demanded much more than a single chair, there was a tendency to 'evolve a design which is cheap to produce and easy to sell'. Yet, the market decreed that items that looked shoddy would not sell, so 'the capitalist has to put on...a bit of culture – a claw-and-ball foot in the manner of Chippendale, a wriggly bit of scrollwork...an inlay of mother-of-pearl'.²⁰

In turning to examine the material failures of capitalism, and advance a critique of the impoverished aesthetic standards nurtured by the market, Read demonstrated that his argument owed more to William Morris than scientific socialism.²¹ Indeed, while Friedrich Engels was prone to dismiss Morris as a 'very rich but politically inept art lover', and lamented that he had 'far more truck with the anarchists than is desirable', Read saw him as the proponent of a sophisticated politics whose message remained compelling:

Morris...was a revolutionary socialist; he did not believe that industrial design...would be transformed without a transformation of society...[He] felt no *general* impulse towards an organic art could be expected 'till civilization itself has been transformed into some other condition of life...' Meanwhile only a *makeshift* art was possible.²²

But despite this praise, and while accepting that he held more complex views on the role of machinery than had been appreciated, Read echoed Kropotkin's position that Morris tended to miss the 'gracefulness' of the machine.²³ To this end, Read wrote that in seeing machines as mere 'scavengers and coal-heavers', Morris had overlooked the 'precision and power' they embodied, a refinement that had become more pronounced since the days of the power loom. This had an important consequence for aesthetic value in the age of mass production, and in *To Hell With Culture*, Read moved from dismantling his creaking chair, to defining the 'work of art' as something that shows 'fitness for function'.²⁴ Sensitive design was the key, and while this diligence was always jeopardised by the pressures of profit, the machine was not necessarily the enemy of beauty.²⁵

While this defence of machine production sat comfortably with Read's modernist proclivities, he was conscious that the image of the worker chained to the production line was a defining motif of nineteenth-century socialism. Turning to his second 'condition of democracy', Read framed his discussion as an interrogation of the maxim 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs', a phrase he wrongly attributed to Marx and Engels rather than Louis Blanc via Henri de Saint-Simon.²⁶ Returning to the 'profit system', he argued that its effect was to rationalise labour in a manner that 'subordinates the person to the job'. With 'capitalism concerned with labour only as a power element, the partner of steam and electricity' the capitalist shackles the worker to the clock, continually seeking to extract greater productivity, frequently at the expense of quality. This was the universal logic of capitalist labour, Read opined, not a feature unique to Adam Smith's pin manufacturers or Engels' cotton operatives:

If the work requires any considerable degree of skill, care or deliberation, then the quality will decline in inverse ratio to the speed of production. This applies...to "artistic" work such as painting and sculpture, but also to "practical" work such as grinding the cylinders of an aero-engine or ploughing a field.²⁷

Real emancipation therefore rested less on freeing the worker from the machine, than on liberating time from market reason. Given Read's argument that machine production did not necessarily damage aesthetic worth, Luddism was no solution, and instead, he airily concluded that the key was to ensure that 'every man and woman is doing the job for which he or she feels naturally qualified; and if...nature needs a little assistance, it can be provided by schools.'²⁸

Read argued that the prudence of the first part of the slogan ('from each according to his ability') was therefore easy to prove, but the problem was that the second half ('to each according to his need') was 'the more important half...the essentially democratic half.'²⁹ Defining these needs could be straightforward, and he suggested that 'early socialists like Marx and Engels' probably had food, clothing and housing in mind, but that this missed the fact that 'in any civilisation worth living in, the needs of man are not merely material'. For a thinker obsessed with the status of art it is unsurprising that Read would look with trepidation at the potential cultural aridity of a world that simply secured the necessities of life. 'The needs of man are not merely material', he wrote, 'he hungers for other things – for beauty, for companionship, for joy'.³⁰

In pointing to the necessity of socialism securing qualitative as well quantitative change, Read demonstrated that his aesthetic politics drew on a deeper reading of socialist history. The shadow of Morris falls once more on this argument, but Read was similarly indebted to that other pioneer who combined a dissection of capitalism with a critique of the aesthetic values of industrialism: John Ruskin. Lamprooning those 'doctors of that science' of political economy in his famous series of essays collected as *Unto This Last* (1860), Ruskin mounted a challenge to the bromides of laissez-faire economics that Read's argument paralleled in several ways.³¹ A key target of his invective was John Stuart Mill, whom, despite his renown, Ruskin privately estimated a 'poor cretinous wretch'.³² Betraying the Victorian origins of the text, Ruskin took the case of the domestic servant as his example, dismissing the notion that poor pay, poor lodgings and exacting labour equalled extracting 'the greatest average work'. Perhaps 'if the servant were an engine of which the motive power was steam' this would be true, but instead their 'motive power is a Soul' and the surest way to rouse this engine is 'by its own proper fuel: namely...the affections'. If sympathy was essential to productive labour, Ruskin added that this was jeopardised by the way capitalism threw 'both wages and trade into the form of a lottery', making the availability of gainful employment consistently uncertain. Similarly, he challenged the iniquity of 'money payment', with an appeal to justice: 'If we promise to give him [the labourer] less labour than he has given us, we under-pay him'.³³ And so, in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1852), Ruskin urged his readers, like Read asking us to consider our inadequate chair, to turn out attention away from the glory of the Gothic to 'this English room of yours.' Examine 'again all those accurate mouldings, and perfect polishings' and you find 'a slavery in our England', where 'her multitudes is sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke'.³⁴

Ruskin, like Read, developed a social critique from a critique of the aesthetic barbarism of capitalism. To Read's mind, even though Ruskin rushed too quickly to dismiss mechanisation as his eyes fell upon the smokestacks and slagheaps of a rampant industrial society, his challenge retained its value. 'Some eighty years after Ruskin wrote *Unto This Last*', Read stated in *The Grass Roots of Art* (1955), professional economists were reaching 'the same conclusions that he did – namely, that 'there is no wealth but life''.³⁵ Years later Read would rethink this assessment of Ruskin's place in British intellectual life, and while espying his general eclipse, argued that the simple radiance of his moral vision would ensure that he remained a valuable source of inspiration. It was just his luck, Read wrote, to grow conscious of Ruskin in '1909 or 1910' when 'his tradition was still alive', but second-hand bookshops were inundated with cheap editions of his works, as he started to fall out of favour. Yet while Read sadly concluded that 'some faithful followers survive among our septua- and octogenarians, [but] his readers must now be few, and his influence practically extinct', he insisted that this was a 'temporary' reversal.³⁶ Ruskin's ornate prose found the 'tribute of transplantation' in the work of Marcel Proust, but in 'an age devoted to functional values' its resonance was muted, the morass of 'contradictions, perversities, irrelevancies and truths' his writings offered, out of step with the 'arid logomachy' of a contemporary social science in thrall to Marxist materialism.³⁷ As much as Read was inspired by Ruskin's bold fusion of aesthetic and social criticism, then, there was also an important stylistic inheritance. The force of Ruskin's coruscating challenge to political economy lay not in offering systematic solutions, but in seeking to rock the seemingly unshakeable maxims that governed mid-nineteenth century economic life with flashes of poetic brilliance.³⁸ Read borrowed this technique, and while abjuring Ruskin's apparent dislike of the full stop, similarly strived to develop a style that would be equally sufficient in describing a writhing Turner seascape and the intellectual poverty of capitalism. His object was thus a rhetoric more replete with shade and

subtlety than Churchillian tub-thumping, and Ruskin was a key inspiration. 'Ruskin is always by my side', he confided in a letter to the American writer Edward Dahlberg, 'in his different way, he is almost as various as Shakespeare.'³⁹

In outlining the first two foundations a meaningful democracy Read roved widely in the history of socialist thought – Marx, Morris, Ruskin, Kropotkin – keen to present the message of *To Hell With Culture* as one that would not solely appeal to anarchists. Lest the real thrust of the pamphlet be missed, however, in turning to the third condition, 'worker's ownership of industry', Read stressed that his vision of democracy was antithetical to the way in which Marxism had developed over the twentieth century. Indeed, pointing to 'that authoritarian form of socialism which Marx made the predominant form of socialism', he saw an echo of its tendency towards economic centralism and state control in the fascist systems menacing peace in Europe: 'the Anti-democratic Order of Hitler, Mussolini and their satraps Pétain, Franco, Quisling, Antonescu, etc.'⁴⁰ To dismiss these as temporary aberrations was unhelpful, he observed, for what that masked was an essential continuity between the authoritarian polities and the purportedly democratic states that confronted them. 'Everywhere in the north of Europe – Germany, Scandinavia, France and Great Britain – the authoritarian or bureaucratic conception of socialism triumphed', Read argued, and what was clear for him that this "'conceptual" triumph...has not brought with it what we mean by the Democratic Order'.⁴¹

Whatever the practical efficiencies of these mass political structures in establishing systems of 'social security' guaranteeing employment and wages, Read saw in their centripetal drive 'profoundly undemocratic' forces at work.⁴² Given the importance of inter-war economic instability in making authoritarian political movements seem like the antidote to capitalism's repeated crises, their appeal was no mystery, but he perceived a Pyrrhic victory in the order they offered:

Whatever it gives in the way of social security, it takes away in the form of spiritual liberty. Every Nazi worker must sell his soul before he can belong to this New Order.⁴³

Just as British capitalism failed to fashion a chair worth sitting in, Read saw in the cultural creations of the German and Italian regimes a litmus test of their vitality. Echoing his appreciation of Socialist Realism, which he saw as affronting artistic integrity in making creativity 'subservient to...political theories', Read saw fascism following suit, betraying its intellectual bankruptcy in the banality of its art.⁴⁴ This pointed to a broader truth he believed, and looking to the Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile, who 'sold himself to the Fascist régime' as the ghostwriter of Benito Mussolini's *La dottrina del fascismo* (1932), Read turned his words against him. In a previous life as a philosopher of education, Gentile had called for an end to 'pre-established programmes...of any description' seeing in educational institutions an Hegelian unfolding of 'spirit' defined by perpetual development. Constant evolution made it illogical, Gentile concluded, to pursue any path of 'pre-determination' in education, and, anyway, the urge to control these forces would be counterproductive, for 'spiritual activity works only in the plenitude of freedom'.⁴⁵

Read seized on the sad irony that these words were uttered by a thinker elevated to the position of Minister of Education under Mussolini, but while he wondered whether Gentile continued to whisper these words to himself while surveying the 'tyranny...and spiritual poverty' he helped furnish with respectability, he also highlighted the centrality of this plenitude to meaningful democracy.⁴⁶ What this revealed, Read suggested in *The Politics of the Unpolitical* (1943), was the

enduring relevance of anarchists' fixation on the size of decision-making units. Railing against 'surrender to mass opinions and mass standards', he insisted that falling in step with the clumsy march of elephantine states was no guarantee of meaningful liberty, and that democracy could only be saved through a diffusion of power:

The direction must be reversed – political power must be distributed among the counties, the cities, the villages and the parishes – distributed and broken into human, tangible units.⁴⁷

As fascism and communism competed to fit Europe to their centralising mould, and Churchill insisted that he had 'not become the King's First Minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire', Read saw the only rational hope laying in a very different direction.⁴⁸ For what the 'non-poetic prophets' ('Marx...Lenin...Hitler') of these systems revealed, was that such intellectually barren totalitarianisms could never realise the plenitude of freedom that would allow a truly different kind of life to flourish. Such tyrannies would temporise with culture, but for Read, the fate of the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, whom he saw driven to suicide as his enthusiasm for the experimental promise of Bolshevik *proletkult* turned to anguish in the age of Socialist Realism, was indicative.⁴⁹ These 'systems cannot inspire culture, they cannot guarantee the creative activity of the poet': to hell with such a culture.⁵⁰

'A Culture of Pots and Pans!': Necessary Utopias

Part of the rhetorical power of *To Hell With Culture* lay in its jarring title, which seemed to pose the idea that Read, doyen of the artistic avant-garde, had experienced a radically philistine change of heart. Those readers opening the pages of the pamphlet and bypassing Williams' prosaic introduction quickly found themselves disabused of this notion, as Read explained his title in an epigraph borrowed from 'a man recently dead who was both a true artist and a true socialist', the sculptor, artist and designer, Eric Gill. Gill's statement – 'To hell with culture, culture as a thing added like a sauce to otherwise unpalatable stale fish!' – informed the most significant aspect of Read's argument, extending the narrowly political call for production for use, communistic distribution, and workers' control of industry, into an image of cultural life flourishing afresh in the ruins of capitalism and the state. Yet as is clear from Read's comments on totalitarianism, his project was not just a utopian thought-experiment serving to outline the boundaries of the possible, but was also a dissection of the cultural abuses of fascism and communism. The wartime context of *To Hell With Culture* is again crucial therefore, illuminating Read's effort to imagine a form of existence that would free Europe from repeating the horrors of its war-torn twentieth century. It was 'a question of life or death'.⁵¹

Although Gill's reputation has suffered in recent years after the troubling revelations about his private life exposed by his biographer Fiona MacCarthy, Read, unaware of this aspect of his character, always insisted that Gill's work gravitated towards anarchism.⁵² Despite this endorsement, their relationship got off to a rocky start, however. Writing from Pigotts Farm in High Wycombe, where he was engaged in building what Read later termed an 'ideal community', Gill objected to Read's recent review of one of his books in *The Spectator*, complaining that he was 'disturbed' by the 'adverse parts of your criticism'.⁵³ Nevertheless, Read's conciliatory words evidently worked, as a placated Gill subsequently attributed their differences principally to a 'matter

of terminology'.⁵⁴ Indeed, he added that they were united in seeing the 'uniqueness of the individual' as the cornerstone of their philosophy, and invoked his ardent Catholicism to pose in parenthesis the question that 'that's the chief original contribution of Christianity to the world, is it not?' Although professedly agnostic, Read would probably have answered 'not', but as Gill moved on to outline his position on culture, Read found himself in greater agreement.⁵⁵ 'I want to keep the word 'art' down to the level of ordinary making', Gill scratchily scribbled, '& I want to exalt the workman to the high level of the imagination maker'.⁵⁶ This concept would find its way into *To Hell With Culture*, but in a final letter at the end of October 1940, as Gill noted that 'I have to go into hospital for an operation...at Harefield ...if you are passing that way' (he would die there two weeks' later), he explicitly united their political visions:

Thank you...for sending me your pamphlet P. of A. [Philosophy of Anarchism]...this seems to me...a most valuable...document. I find it difficult to discover anything I don't agree with, and in spite of the appearance to the contrary I am really in complete agreement with you about the necessity of anarchism, the ultimate truth of it, and its immediate practicability as syndicalism.⁵⁷

Christianity again proved a source of divergence, however. While Gill's religious unorthodoxy found expression when he commended Read for challenging 'institutional and totalitarian religion', and confessed to feeling at times that 'all the church stuff is bilge', he betrayed the enduring hold of his faith: 'yet you know that you are after all only a silly sheep like the rest'.⁵⁸ And, Gill wrote, Read's main error in *The Philosophy of Anarchism* (1940) was failing to distinguish between the 'individual' and the 'person'. The uniqueness of the 'person', he assessed, was the 'primary doctrine of Christianity', while 'as individuals they may not be' unique.⁵⁹

For Read, pondering Gill's legacy in a lengthy article in the immediate aftermath of his death, the appellation 'anarchist' was wholly fitting, but it did not do justice to the range of his activities. Echoing Gill's recommendation that he study his essay 'Ownership and Industrialism', Read described this as a perfect primer on 'the principles of anarchism', and noted that not only did Gill possess integrity, but had also managed to 'live' like an anarchist.⁶⁰ In attaining this empyrean ideal, Read commented that Gill's major achievement in his diverse creative activities was to shatter the distinction between 'the artist and the ordinary man':

In any decent society, he would say, every man was a special kind of artist – in which case the term lost its significance; but in the actual society in which we live, the man who calls himself artist is a false pretender of some sort – if he does not impose on other people, he imposes on himself.⁶¹

Accepting this ethos led Gill, Read proposed, to realise the true radicalism of a socialism that was not of the 'politicians and bureaucrats', but attacked the obscured root of contemporary iniquities: 'the love of money'.⁶² Gill turned to God in his distaste for the rule of the 'men of business', but here too found frustration in the 'timidity and hypocrisy of his fellow-Christians', as they passively accepted capitalist mores. Praising Gill's efforts to construct a 'cell of good living in the chaos of our world', but downplaying the religious cadence of his politics, Read concurred that a 'spiritual and mental revolution' was imperative. Only this, liberating 'industrial unions and regional collectives' to make the workplace the locus of a new kind of life, offered a rational solution to the irrationalities of the age: 'National Socialism, Fascism, and Bolshevism'.⁶³

Read's understanding of how this revolution would unfold was nonchalantly imprecise. 'Anarchism does not rely on plans', he pointedly noted, 'which...tend to leave out the imponderable...factors of human existence'.⁶⁴ This is an argument with a fine anarchist pedigree⁶⁵, but in his article on Gill, it tended towards the gnomic, as he concluded that 'we must live according to natural laws, and by virtue of the power which comes from concentrating on their manifestation in the individual human mind'.⁶⁶ Such ponderous prose was unusual for an arch-stylist like Read, and in *To Hell With Culture* he not only endeavoured to leaven the rhetoric of this argument, but reimagine Gill's defence of craft labour as the foundation of an emancipated society. For Read, while totalitarian dictatorships and capitalist democracies alike were deeply concerned about culture, they were blind to the fact it was insufficient to simply will a vibrant culture into being, or throw money at the problem. The existence of the *Reichskulturkammer* and the USA's Federal Arts Project demonstrated an appetite to support cultural initiatives, but such patronage simply served to illustrate the truth of Gill's dictum, 'that no amount of sauce will disguise the staleness of the underlying fish'.⁶⁷ Moreover, as much as autocrats 'weave a cloak of culture' to shroud their crimes, the aesthetic sterility of Socialist Realism and the Nazi's *blut und boden* romanticism was its own testament to these regimes' lack of cultural brio.⁶⁸ 'You cannot buy the spiritual values which make the greatness of a nation's art', Read continued, and neither can you cultivate them unless 'you prepare the soil'. With his three democratic principles in mind, he added that 'freedom' was the necessary condition of an organic culture, but cautioned that this did not amount to the 'letting alone' that in capitalist countries subjected artists to the dictates of the market. The solution was far more radical: 'I have said: To hell with culture; and to this consignment we might add another: To hell with the artist.'⁶⁹

Like a latter-day Bakunin, in calling for the abolition of the artist, Read also called for the destruction wrought by the war to be treated as an opportunity to build a better world. 'When Hitler has finished bombing our cities, let the demolition squads complete the good work', he wrote, dismissing 'our capitalist culture' as 'one immense veneer...hiding the cheapness and shoddiness at the heart of things'. As the V2 and the wrecking ball offered a clean slate, Read saw this as a chance to replace Britain's labyrinthine slums, its urban sprawl, and its industrial deserts, with a rationally-planned environment that was 'spacious, with traffic flowing freely through...leafy avenues [and] with children playing safely in their green and flowery parks'.⁷⁰ But Read's Howardian garden city was a resolutely modernist construction, with the 'elements of modern industry – electric power, metal alloys, cement, the tractor and [the] aeroplane' standing as motifs of a society that had negotiated a fresh relationship between the past and the present. In this vein, he emphatically rejected what he saw as the Morrisian and Ruskinian antidote of 'revert[ing] to the peasant's hut', while nevertheless accepting their diagnosis.⁷¹

As Read rebuilt Britain in his imagination, he saw a country beginning a long experiment with mutual aid and participatory democracy, and perceived the shoots of a new culture slowly germinating in its fields, factories and workshops. In such a society the 'worker' would supersede the redundant category of the 'artist', as the idea of 'art as a separate profession' disappears, and art no longer amounts to curios safely ensconced behind gallery doors.⁷² Welcoming a 'culture of pots and pans' as the initial expression of a vibrant society – as ebullient as those 'primitive civilisations' of the past that had achieved a degree of liberty in their instinctual pursuit of mutual aid – Read pointed out that Greek civilisation did not begin with the Parthenon, but with a 'white-washed hut on a hillside'.⁷³ Given the bounty afforded by modern technology, which to his optimistic mind held before it the possibility of ending the economic relationships that trapped the worker in endless toil,

the potential to surpass such cultural achievements was very real. The democracy that Read imagined was therefore one in which the ability to create was universalised, but he also envisioned the shattering of the distinct status of 'culture' under capitalism. Liberated from a market logic that transformed cultural artefacts into prized ornaments or ostentatious displays of refinement, culture would exist, he posited, in a manner similar to its status in ancient Greece. While this brave new world forged novel and luminescent aesthetic values, it would be, like the culture of the city states, 'something natural...something of which they were unconscious...It could not...be described as a by-product of their way of life: it was that way of life itself.'⁷⁴

This was an ambitious vision. While his fellow travellers in the 'Democratic Order' pamphlet series similarly aimed to slay the five giants impugned by Beveridge in 1942 for obstructing the 'road to reconstruction', Read was not satisfied in tinkering with economic policy and contemplating balance sheets.⁷⁵ Acting as David in picking up the pebble of culture to attack Beveridge's giants – a fitting metaphor if it is remembered that Goliath came from Philistia – he saw in a democratic revolution the roots of a renaissance far more expansive, and lasting, than that augured by Jay's strong economic leadership or Stapledon's autarky. If *To Hell With Culture* now seems otherworldly in its naïveté, then perhaps this is a testament to the extent to which the 'promise provoked by wartime needs has been forgotten', filtered as it is for modern readers through the lens of the dismantling of the post-war welfare state that began in earnest in the 1970s.⁷⁶

Yet, even some contemporaries found Read's optimism difficult to swallow. 'Good old Herbert', wrote the Imagist poet F.S. Flint to Read in 1941, after finding a copy of his tract while 'nosing' around a bookshop in his hometown of Southport. Stating that he was happy to 'thr[o]w away a whole shilling' on the book, as it offered 'a very good argument' and he 'agree[d] with it wholeheartedly', Flint nevertheless proceeded to offer a four-page disquisition unpicking his thesis thread by thread. Given that Flint enjoyed a second life as an economist, he unsurprisingly chided Read for having 'no notion at all of what is really wrong with the economic system', accusing him of refuting 'the fallacies of your opponents with your own...fallacies', and of being 'sentimental and romantic.' He rejected Read's notion of production for use and not profit, a formulation as empty as 'Marx's silly phrase' surplus value he wrote, countering that profit was not the issue, but rather 'all workers...[and]...their habits of saving'. Saving, he concluded, served to 'nullify their claims...on the present', and as it was inherent in 'a profit-seeking system' caused financial instability. Arguing that 'collectivism' was the only solution, Flint moved on to reject Read's second condition of 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' as hopelessly woolly, and betrayed their fundamentally diverging ideas when he wrote:

Who is to decide what my abilities and needs are? You? I? Bill Smith? Not likely! The Soviet Constitution is more realistic. It says: from each according to his ability, to each according to his labour.⁷⁷

While Flint and Read talked past each other in their respective defences of national planning ('Ownership by the nation, Herbert, I insist') and a radically regional democracy, their disagreement highlights the extent to which Read's politics would face an uphill struggle in the collectivising spirit of the post-war decades.⁷⁸ As a friend, Flint cheerfully rebuked Read ('If you want a Hell without culture, come to Southport'), but his warning that he had failed to recognise the coming 'collectivist form, in which [the owners] will still be rich, the workers being bribed with security', was prescient

of Read's failure to offer a distinctive response to the rise of post-war welfarism. In a similar spirit, if more laconically, a group review of the 'Democratic Order' tracts in the *Times Literary Supplement* admired Read's ambition, but deemed that if left too much unsaid: 'It is doubtful whether "To Hell with Culture" solves all the cultural problems of our mass civilization'.⁷⁹

Conclusion

Churchill revelled in the stentorian grandness of his rhetoric, but it ultimately rested on a few basic techniques. He drew on the emboldening quality of repetition ('Victory – victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be'); analogies from Britain's martial history ('I have...full confidence that if all do their duty'); imitation of the phraseology of iconic British writers ('Never...was so much owed, by so many, to so few'), and knotty wordplay.⁸⁰ What this Churchillian ornament obscured though was the essential simplicity of his understanding of the world. Colourful as his language was, dark confronted light in his speeches, as good defied evil in his mind, and he held an unerring faith that manifest destiny was not an ever expanding United States, but the 'English-speaking peoples' united in their 'formidable virtues' forever safeguarding 'Peace and Freedom'.⁸¹ That he chose to capitalise these terms is revealing; peace and freedom were not disputed concepts around which marauding factions clustered, but attributes personified in a constitutional consensus that could trace its roots back to the Glorious Revolution.

This simplicity perhaps also explains why Churchill's oratory, so frequently, even in the words of an admirer, 'flatulent, bombastic, histrionic, overblown', appeals to British politicians struggling to define Britain's role in the world as its economic power fades.⁸² Perhaps his single-minded defiance is a seductive model of political virtue for ambitious politicians in an age when the conventions of parliamentary democracy inspire particular disillusionment. But just as Adeane dismissed Churchill as a popinjay, and remained redoubtably unmoved by his rhetorical bluster, the 'Democratic Order' pamphlets, and Read's contribution, emphasise the fact that the Second World War was also a battle of ideas. And this intellectual conflict for the meaning of democracy was not owned by the fascist, communist, and capitalist countries razing each other's cities, but was shaped by a chorus of dissident voices.

Read's anarchism was one strand amongst many. Drawing on the long history of socialist thought, he presented the broad contours of a democratic society worthy of the name, and imagined a utopia in which mutual aid and workers' ownership spurred a vigorous cultural life. Like those integrated societies of the past that inspired him, this would be a society unconscious of its culture, where aesthetically sophisticated objects were simply the efflux of a daily life that had liberated the creative potential of everyone. As the post-Yalta world immured political decision making in newly fabricated convention centres, and Europe's cities were rebuilt under the watchful gaze of the technical 'expert', Read's *To Hell With Culture* was an early outcry against the advances of technocracy. Not, that is, that he rejected the advances of science or technology. The *logos* of his pamphlet rested on the compassionate application of machinery to build a better world, and like a good Kropotkinian, he yearned for a more sensitive blend of the forces of rationalism and feeling. For Read though, the true measure of the success of these efforts of reconstruction would be art, just as the vapidness of Socialist Realism and the artifices of capitalist ornament sought to mask the underlying rottenness of at the heart of things. 'Art', he wrote in 1963, deeming the argument of *To*

Hell With Culture as enduringly significant as its ambitions remained unfulfilled, 'is always the index of social vitality'.⁸³

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¹ David Cameron, 'Winston Churchill Memorial Event: PM Speech', 30th January 2015.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/winston-churchill-memorial-event-pm-speech>

² Herbert Read, *English Prose Style* (London: G.Bell & Sons, 1932), 192.

³ Isaiah Berlin, 'Mr. Churchill and F.D.R.', *Cornhill Magazine*, Vol.164, Nos. 979-984 (Summer, 1949), 219-241 (219). For Read's experience of the First World War, consider: Matthew S. Adams, 'Herbert Read and the Fluid Memory of the First World War: Poetry, Prose, and Polemic', *Historical Research*, 88:240 (May, 2015), 333-354.

⁴ Berlin, 'Mr. Churchill and F.D.R.', 228.

⁵ Louis Adeane to George Woodcock: 1st January 1950: *George Woodcock Papers, Queen's University, Kingston*, Box 4: 2095: File 01.

⁶ Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51* (London: Penguin, 2006), 26.

⁷ Hennessy, *Never Again*, 73; William Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services: Report by Sir William Beveridge* (New York: Macmillan, 1942).

⁸ Francis Williams, *What Are We Fighting For? A Call to Britain* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1941), 60, 62, 63.

⁹ John Macmurray, *Challenge to the Churches: Religion and Democracy* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1941), 15, 63. Original emphasis.

¹⁰ Douglas Jay, *Who Is To Pay for the War? And the Peace?* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1941), 9, 50, 51.

¹¹ George Stapledon quoted in Robert Waller, *Prophet of the New Age: The Life and Thought of Sir George Stapledon, F.R.S.* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 243.

¹² Herbert Read, *To Hell With Culture: Democratic Values are New Values* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1941), 19.

¹³ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 13.

¹⁴ Williams, 'Introduction', v; Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 19.

¹⁵ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 19; Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: Triumph and Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1953), n.p.

¹⁶ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 20.

¹⁷ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 20.

¹⁸ 'Romanticism was, and is, a universal phenomenon...Romanticism is as old as art itself'. Herbert Read, *The True Voice of Feeling: Studies in English Romantic Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 15. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, Trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39, 111-47.

¹⁹ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 22

²⁰ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 22, 23.

²¹ Michael Paraskos, 'Introduction' to Herbert Read, *To Hell With Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002), ix-xxiii (xvii).

²² 'Engels to Karl Kautsky: 21-22 June 1884'; 'Engels to Paul Lafargue: 20 March 1886' in *The Collected Works of Marx and Engels: Letters 1844-1895: Volume 47* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2001), 155-156 (156) and 431-433 (432); Herbert Read, *Design and Tradition: The Design Oration (1961) of the Society of Industrial Artists* (Hemingford Grey: The Vine Press, 1962), 5. Original emphasis.

²³ Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (London: The Folio Society, [1899] 1978), 95.

²⁴ Herbert Read, *A Coat of Many Colours: Occasional Essays* (London: Routledge, 1947), 78; Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 25.

²⁵ Read developed this idea in an earlier text. See: Herbert Read, *Art and Industry: The Principles of Industrial Design* (London: Faber and Faber, [1934] 1944).

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- ²⁶ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 25-6; Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, The Golden Age, The Breakdown*, trans. P.S. Falla (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 157.
- ²⁷ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 26, 27.
- ²⁸ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 28.
- ²⁹ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 28.
- ³⁰ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 29.
- ³¹ John Ruskin, *Unto This Last: Four Essays on the Principle of Political Economy* (London: George Allen, Sunnyside, Orpington, 1898), 10.
- ³² John Ruskin cited in Donald Winch, *Wealth and Life: Essays on the Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1848-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 91.
- ³³ Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 22, 81.
- ³⁴ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice: Volume the Second* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1867), 162.
- ³⁵ Herbert Read, *The Grass Roots of Art: Lectures on the Social Aspects of Art in an Industrial Age* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 118.
- ³⁶ Herbert Read, *The Contrary Experience: Autobiographies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 273, 274.
- ³⁷ Read, *Contrary Experience*, 274, 275; Herbert Read, *Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1949), 30.
- ³⁸ Willie Henderson, *John Ruskin's Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2000), 32.
- ³⁹ Herbert Read to Edward Dahlberg: 26th December 1959, *Herbert Read Papers, University of Victoria* [Hereafter: *HRPUV*]: HR/Ed-415 Encl.026.
- ⁴⁰ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 30.
- ⁴¹ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 30.
- ⁴² Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 31.
- ⁴³ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 32. For a general background, consider: Richard Overy, *The Twilight Years: The Paradox of Britain Between the Wars* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 50-92.
- ⁴⁴ Read, *A Coat of Many Colours*, 219.
- ⁴⁵ Giovanni Gentile, *The Reform of Education*, trans. Dino Bigongiari (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922), 244.
- ⁴⁶ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 34.
- ⁴⁷ Herbert Read, *The Politics of the Unpolitical* (London: Routledge, 1943), 160.
- ⁴⁸ Churchill quoted in John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 351.
- ⁴⁹ Herbert Read, *Poetry and Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, [1938] 1947), 12-13.
- ⁵⁰ Read, *Politics of the Unpolitical*, 160.
- ⁵¹ Read, *Politics of the Unpolitical*, 100.
- ⁵² Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill* (London: Faber, 1989).
- ⁵³ Read, *A Coat of Many Colours*, 7; Eric Gill to Herbert Read: 20th August 1934, *HRPMLUV*: HR/EG-3
- ⁵⁴ Eric Gill to Herbert Read: 27th August 1934, *Herbert Read Papers, McPherson Library, University of Victoria* [Hereafter: *HRPMLUV*], HR/EG-5.
- ⁵⁵ Herbert Read, *The Cult of Sincerity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968) 112
- ⁵⁶ Gill to Read: 27th August 1934, HR/EG-5 & HR/EG-6.
- ⁵⁷ Eric Gill to Herbert Read: 31st October 1940, *HRPMLUV*: HR/EG-13
- ⁵⁸ Eric Gill to Herbert Read: 14th March 1940, *HRPMLUV*: HR/EG-11
- ⁵⁹ Gill to Read: 14th March 1940.
- ⁶⁰ Read, *A Coat of Many Colours*, 6; Gill to Read: 31st October 1940.
- ⁶¹ Read, *A Coat of Many Colours*, 6.
- ⁶² Read, *A Coat of Many Colours*, 7.
- ⁶³ Read, *A Coat of Many Colours*, 10, 11, 16, 11.
- ⁶⁴ Read, *A Coat of Many Colours*, 16.
- ⁶⁵ For a useful overview, consider: Laurence Davis and Ruth Kinna (eds.) *Anarchism and Utopianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009). For Read's views on utopianism, see: Matthew S. Adams, *Kropotkin, Read, and the Intellectual History of British Anarchism: Between Reason and Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- ⁶⁶ Read, *A Coat of Many Colours*, 16.
- ⁶⁷ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 35.
- ⁶⁸ Read, *Politics of the Unpolitical*, 139.

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- ⁶⁹ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 35, 36.
- ⁷⁰ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 49.
- ⁷¹ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 49.
- ⁷² Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 36.
- ⁷³ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 39, 47. For more on mutual aid and culture, consider: Herbert Read, *Anarchy and Order: Essays in Politics* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), 222-228. See also: Adams, *Kropotkin, Read, and the Intellectual History of British Anarchism*.
- ⁷⁴ Read, *To Hell With Culture*, 8
- ⁷⁵ Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, 6. 'But Want is only one of five giants on the road of reconstruction and in some ways the easiest to attack. The others are Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness', 6.
- ⁷⁶ Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: Continuum, 1997), 55.
- ⁷⁷ F.S. Flint to Herbert Read: 2nd April 1941, *HRPMLUV*, HR/FSF-10-13.
- ⁷⁸ Flint to Read: 2nd April 1941.
- ⁷⁹ Felix Theodore Fries, 'Towards the New Order', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15th March 1941, 122.
- ⁸⁰ Winston S. Churchill, *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat: the Great Speeches* (London: Penguin, 2007), 149, 164, 188.
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- ⁸² David Cannadine, 'Introduction' to *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat*, xiii-lii (xxviii).
- ⁸³ Herbert Read, 'Preface' to *To Hell With Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), ix-xii (xii).