

Two Cultures and Beyond

Interview with Guy Ortolano

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GO: Guy Ortolano

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YH: First of all, would you please introduce yourself to the readers of JCS and why you choose to study history?

GO: I teach modern British history and the history of science at New York University. I grew up in Stone Mountain, Georgia (notoriously home to the Confederate Mount Rushmore, now part of the endless suburbs around metropolitan Atlanta), and went to college at the University of Georgia. I bounced around between majors during my first year, until I became fascinated by a survey of modern European history. The professor of that survey was Kirk Willis, a specialist in British intellectual history, and when I carried on in the major, eventually writing an undergraduate thesis, I continued working with Dr. Willis. My thesis examined the British reaction to the news of the atomic bombings of Japan at the end of World War II (a reaction that was remarkably optimistic, with grandiose predictions of atomic cookers and cars, despite the destructive nature of atomic energy's debut), and this topic stimulated an interest in public attitudes towards science and scientists more generally. I applied to graduate school to study modern British history, cultural and intellectual history, and the history of science, a combination that led almost inevitably to Northwestern University (just north of Chicago). There I had the chance to learn from a remarkable group of scholars and teachers: Bill Heyck in modern British history, Ken Alder in the history of science, John Bushnell in European history, David Joravsky in intellectual history, and Alex Owen, Sarah Maza, and Ed Muir in cultural history. I completed my dissertation in 2005, and taught at Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Virginia, before arriving at NYU in the fall of 2009.

YH: Which are your main interests in this field?

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GO: My general interests include modern Britain, science and technology, and cultural and intellectual history, and more specifically I am interested in such topics as the 1960s (better understood, perhaps, as “the Sixties,” since the developments it refers to reach into the following decades), the New Left, neo-conservatism, meritocracy, and the problem of national “decline” (about which I’ll say more in a moment). I am now becoming interested in certain aspects of urban history, especially in the intersection between state planning and Modernist aesthetics during the twentieth century, and I continue to work on the history of academic disciplines such as history, literary studies, and, currently, modernization theory. Looking over that list, it’s not obvious what connects it all together, except to say that one of my preoccupations is the way that the history of the recent past can look surprisingly unfamiliar – and that is the case, I think, in the history of the “two cultures” controversy, the subject of my first book, and the history of British New Towns, the subject of my current research.

YH: This year Cambridge University Press published your book *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain*. Congratulations! What are your main arguments then?

GO: The book’s main arguments address three objects of study. The first is the notorious controversy between the scientist-turned-novelist C. P. Snow and the literary critic F. R. Leavis, which began with Snow’s Rede Lecture in Cambridge, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, in 1959, reached new heights of acrimony with Leavis’s Richmond Lecture, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow*, in 1962, and continued intermittently until a final exchange in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1970. The question I pose is how a topic as familiar as the relationship between the arts and the sciences could have generated such controversy at this particular moment, and I answer that question by depicting their argument as an ideological conflict about competing visions of the past, present, and future. Then, having identified, described, and named those rival positions – namely, as competing versions of a meritocratic liberalism, one radical and one technocratic – I track the conflict between them in arguments over the mission of the university, the methodology of social history, the problem of national “decline,” the future of the former British Empire, and the meaning of the Sixties. This is what I mean by “cultural politics” in the title of the book – the way that advocates of rival ideological positions competed to shape the interpretation of a whole range of issues – and, since these efforts took place between 1959 and 1970, this interpretation of the “two cultures” controversy also reveals the stakes of cultural politics in Britain during the 1960s more generally.

The second object of study is this period of postwar British history – roughly speaking, the three decades following the Second World War. This is not something that I initially intended to generalize about, but in writing the book I noticed fundamental similarities between Snow, Leavis, and their respective allies, and these similarities became even more evident as the 1960s turned into the 1970s. By that time the arguments and persons that had recently commanded widespread respect were becoming marginalized, giving the impression that they belonged to another era altogether. In their later writings and lectures Snow and Leavis responded to this development in identical ways, denouncing what they viewed as a modish concern for equality, and unfashionably insisting upon the need for elites of all sorts – indeed, this argument (rather

than the discussion of disciplines) comprised the majority of Snow's final statement on the "two cultures" controversy in 1970. Now, if you are thinking that this shift from remarks about disciplines to the defense of elites requires some explanation, I entirely agree – and in fact, making sense of this development emerged as one of the most interesting challenges in writing the book. Snow and Leavis had been born outsiders to the intellectual class, and as a result they emerged equally committed to meritocratic principles that promised to open institutions to individuals of talent. While this similarity is striking, the difference between them is crucial: Snow believed that modern society as it existed in Britain facilitated the realization of the individual's talents, while Leavis insisted that that very society threatened to eradicate the capacity for excellence altogether. Nevertheless, both Snow and Leavis believed that society should be reformed so to better identify and train intellectual talent, and in this regard they shared widespread assumptions about society and culture during the third quarter of the twentieth century – a period that I refer to as the "meritocratic moment" in British history. During the Sixties these meritocratic commitments came to be challenged by the advocates of more egalitarian ideals (for instance, in the areas of secondary and university education), and the currency gained by these arguments contributed to the eclipse of the reputations and arguments of meritocratic elitists like Snow and Leavis. They responded by adopting steadily more embattled tones over the course of the 1970s, and meanwhile a new generation of liberals required an alternative explanation for the fact of social inequality: an explanation they found, I suggest, in the marketplace thinking that flourished during the final quarter of the century.

The book's third object of study is the historical tradition discussing the relationship between the humanities and the sciences. Familiar installments in that tradition include the argument between Matthew Arnold and Thomas Huxley in the 1880s, and the so-called "science wars" of the 1990s, but there are many others – indeed, the conversation is very nearly constant, even if its tone only occasionally rises to the level that transforms it into a controversy. The Snow-Leavis debate represents one of those moments, and its significance within this longer history is that Snow provided the language through which this tradition came to be understood: as a conflict between "two cultures." The "two cultures," of course, are the sciences and humanities (or literature, or the arts – it changes over time), but that label is problematic because it organizes our understandings of a complicated and various tradition into a tidy dispute about disciplines. I have already suggested why I don't think that characterization explains even the argument between Snow and Leavis during the 1960s, much less those of Victorian Britain, 1920s China, late twentieth-century America, or anywhere else. So my argument regarding the relationship between "two cultures" and this historical tradition is at once negative and positive: *negative* because I argue against the adoption of "two cultures" terms as a way of explaining distinct episodes within that tradition, but at the same time *positive* because the frequent invocation of the "two cultures" can remind us to consider what else might be going in an argument ostensibly about disciplines.

Those are the three most general arguments of the book, but in addition each chapter makes a more specific argument. The first two chapters, on Snow and Leavis, argue that we should understand their arguments not primarily as the expressions of disciplinary loyalties, but rather in the context of more general ideological positions: for Snow, a technocratic liberalism, and for

Leavis, a radical liberalism. The third chapter situates their dispute within Cambridge micropolitics at the time, showing that Snow and Leavis both sought to use this moment of university transformation to translate their ideological visions into institutional forms; and it further shows that their contrary tactics in these efforts – Snow’s clandestine maneuvering, Leavis’s obstreperous defiance – were shaped by their contrary conceptions of how politics works. The fourth chapter identifies links between this controversy and the simultaneous revolution in social history, showing that certain methodological choices (such as whether the discipline of history should become more or less like a quantitative social science) were grafted onto prior political commitments. The fifth chapter relates the controversy to arguments about Britain’s economic decline; it argues that “decline” is just one – and by no means the best – way of understanding postwar British history, one that adopts the assumptions not of disinterested economic analysis, but rather of a technocratic social critique. The sixth chapter relates the controversy to discussions about the future of the former British Empire, arguing that the new nation states of Asia and Africa could function in these conversations as imagined terrain: that is, as intellectual sites where arguments about Britain’s past, the West’s present, and the world’s future all met in one place. And the seventh chapter follows Snow and Leavis as they encountered and resisted egalitarian demands, showing that they responded with equivalent discomfort, but contrary results, to challenges to their meritocratic commitments: Snow’s response led down a path taken by the neo-conservative right, while Leavis’s longstanding critique of marketplace thinking rendered his social critique available to the cultural and political left.

Generally speaking, then, the main arguments are the ideological (more than disciplinary) interpretation of the debate, the meritocratic (rather than declinist) interpretation of postwar Britain, and the deconstruction (rather than replication) of the “two cultures” tradition.

YH: Since the first wave of debate shortly after C. P. Snow’s lecture, there has been a large accumulation of publications over the last five decades. What make your book different with them?

GO: The accumulation has indeed been enormous, and it shows no sign of abating: I would estimate that there were scores (if not hundreds) of commentaries in the early 1960s alone, and this year – the 50th anniversary of Snow’s lecture – has seen yet another burst. I have written elsewhere about the differences between these approaches and my own (*Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 39, 2008), which I would summarize by saying that my approach is *historical*. That is, many commentators engage with Snow by adopting, rejecting, or recasting the “two cultures” categories, and/or they engage with the exchange between Snow and Leavis by defending one side or the other. These approaches might superficially seem different, in that some endorse Snow while others denounce him, but from my perspective they are functionally similar because they all enter the discussion in which Snow and Leavis took part. I don’t want to enter that discussion, I want to analyze it; I am interested not in the ways that Snow speaks to our world, but rather in the ways that he testifies to his world. I would not want to insist that this is the only sensible approach, but I do think it represents an improvement upon a half-century of clichés claiming that the two cultures pose a crisis, or that today’s two cultures are this-and-that,

or that some new technology promises to bridge the two cultures, or that there are actually some other number of cultures (usually one or three). Snow's formulation has undeniably succeeded as a springboard for such discussions, but my hope is that a historical perspective might nudge those discussions forward rather than recycling their claims.

That is the situation regarding what we might think of as journalistic treatments of the controversy, but the difference between my book and most academic accounts is more easily specified. Again, the question I began with was, "Why did this familiar topic ignite such impassioned argument at this particular moment?" There are two predominant answers to that question. The first seeks to explain the controversy by adopting Snow's categories, arguing that this was a dispute between advocates of the arts on one side and the sciences on the other, but this explanation immediately begins to buckle: by the fact, for instance, that Snow's supposedly pro-scientific, anti-arts argument was championed in such places as the *TLS* (a literary periodical) and challenged in such places as *Nature* (a scientific journal); or by the fact that Leavis's supposedly anti-scientific, pro-arts argument was championed by the scientists Michael Yudkin and Michael Polanyi, and challenged by the writers William Gerhardi and Edith Sitwell. In other words, there must be some explanation other than a collision between disciplinary interests, and so a second predominant answer to my initial question situates Snow and Leavis within a longer tradition discussing the arts and the sciences. This explanation has rather more going for it, but it cannot be the whole story, not least because the very existence of this tradition itself begs the question of why the topic should have exploded into such rancor at this particular moment. I conclude, therefore, that disciplinary tensions inflamed the debate, and that the historical tradition informed the debate, but also that something more was going on in the Snow-Leavis controversy. That "something more," I suggest, is politics.

So of all that has been written about Snow, Leavis, and the "two cultures" controversy in the past fifty years, I situate my approach in the company of five scholars in particular. Without going into detail on the arguments of each (something I discuss in the *Studies* essay cited above), I would identify David Cannadine, Stefan Collini, David Edgerton, David Hollinger, and Ian MacKillop as the scholars from whom I have learned the most. I locate my book in relation to their work, and in that context perhaps its most immediate contribution – in addition to its characterizations and explanations of the ideological positions in the debate – is its archival approach. By drawing from private papers in a dozen collections on both sides of the Atlantic, my book shows how the positions in the "two cultures" debate structured alliances and arguments across a whole range of issues at the same time. The result is in part a history of the argument between Snow and Leavis, but it also uses their argument to contribute to our understandings of the larger issues that I mentioned above: university expansion, discipline formation, the "decline" debate, post-imperial Britain, and the Sixties. This kind of analysis only becomes possible once the "two cultures" terms are historicized rather than adopted, and for that reason I find the work of these five scholars especially insightful and generative.

YH: What is the relation between Snow-Leavis controversy and Arnold-Huxley debate, Science-Metaphysics debate (1923-24, China), and the more recently, the Science Wars? Are they variations of one single theme, or totally different concerns and intentions?

GO: You have identified exactly the right poles, between variations on a theme and totally different concerns, and if neither extreme is satisfactory the question becomes how we negotiate between them. Because of what I think is a tendency among intellectual historians to err on the side of the former – that is, to treat the exchange between Snow and Leavis as an iteration (often an unseemly iteration) of a larger discussion – it is imperative to begin by insisting on the distinctions between debates taking place in very different times and places (and the 1920s debate in China testifies to the importance of that distinction more clearly still). For example, if we want to understand the Anglo-American controversy over Alan Sokal’s hoax at the expense of cultural studies during the 1990s, it is not especially helpful to relate Professor Sokal’s argument to Snow’s work for the Labour Party during the 1960s – which is an extreme way of saying that superficial similarities between very different episodes should not distract attention from the ways that these arguments reflect the concerns of their own time and place. Once that point is acknowledged, and distinct arguments are not collapsed together, we can turn to consider the ways that the memories of past disputes shape the form and interpretation of subsequent installments. So neither variations on a theme (which would be ahistorical), nor totally different concerns (which would ignore the existence of a tradition), but rather historically distinct episodes whose content and interpretation are informed by the tradition of which they are a part.

There is actually a parallel here in the historiography of European revolutions. I remember being asked on my comprehensive examination in graduate school whether the Russian Revolution was the logical culmination of the French Revolution. The notion of “logic” in this context strikes me as ahistorical, because it presumes a norm or sequence according to which events unfold, whereas the events in St. Petersburg amid the exigencies of the Great War were of course distinct from the events that unfolded in Paris in the summer of 1789. But then again, while there is no revolutionary *logic* that exists outside of history, there is a revolutionary *script* that is inherited from history. That is, the participants in the Russian Revolution (as well as its subsequent historians) were well aware of the tradition that provided the backdrop for their actions (and interpretations), and there are numerous ways in which that tradition shaped their behaviors (and our histories). So while there is no abstract “logic” that explains the radicalizations of 1789 and 1917, there are ways in which the events of the former influenced the latter: for instance, when contemporaries (and, later, historians) understood Stalin’s terror as intrinsic to the revolution, because it accorded with a revolutionary narrative they had inherited from the example of France. Returning to your initial terms, these paired events – whether France in 1789 and Russia in 1917, or Huxley-Arnold in the 1880s and Snow-Leavis in the 1960s – were related to each other neither as variations on a theme, nor as entirely different concerns, but rather as historically specific episodes that unfolded against the backdrop of, and were informed by, inherited understandings of events that came before.

YH: The year 2009 marks the 50th anniversary of Snow’s original lecture, which offers a good occasion for us to reflect on this topic. What activities did you participate in? What is your experience and impression?

GO: You’re right, there were a great number of “two cultures” events this year. I myself participated in events at the New York Academy of Sciences, the JFK School at Harvard, and the

CRASSH program in Cambridge, and I know of discussions that took place (or are soon to take place) at the Tate Modern, the London Science Museum, the Royal Society, Michigan State University, and the University of Maryland at Baltimore County – and I’m sure there are still others. This remarkable upsurge of interest testifies to the fact that, whatever faults we might register with Snow’s thesis or the way it has been discussed, *The Two Cultures* clearly raised a subject that people want to engage – and not only did Snow raise the subject, he also provided the terms through which these conversations continue to take place. That is a significant achievement, one that shows no signs of abating, and in that sense Snow’s place in intellectual history seems secure.

As for the actual content of these discussions, it is not obvious how they relate to one another. They were each excellent events, but they struck me as so different from each other that it is difficult to say what connected them at all – other than the fact that they took Snow and *The Two Cultures* as their touchstone. For instance, the conference at the New York Academy was primarily a discussion about science, science education, and public policy in the United States, whereas the events at Harvard and Cambridge were more academic affairs about the relationships among disciplines. In fact, this tendency has been the most consistent feature of “two cultures” discussions since 1959: they begin by citing Snow and his lecture, before going on to discuss entirely different things. And that dynamic helps to answer the question of how Snow’s lecture commanded – and continues to command – such widespread attention: it identifies a topic that captures people’s attention, and then leaves them free to discuss whatever they want.

In this sense the “two cultures” is, to paraphrase the historian Joan Scott’s famous essay on gender, both an empty and an overflowing category of analysis: *empty* because it carries no fixed and specific content, *overflowing* because it consequently has been (and continues to be) filled with an endless number of meanings. As a historian attending these events, I am interested not in participating in discussions that make claims about the meaning or significance of the two cultures, but rather in identifying the ways that just such claims have long proliferated and functioned. (An inclination that can have the result, I’m afraid, of making me a somewhat unwelcome guest.)

YH: What do you think of the role of ‘public intellectuals’? Do you think Snow is a good public intellectual? According to your opinion, which role should or could public intellectuals play in a modern society?

GO: Stefan Collini’s *Absent Minds* is the indispensable book on this subject, but I would say that the term can have its use if defined in the right way. The wrong way would be to contrast public intellectuals, who address broad audiences, against narrow specialists, who merely swap jargon, as if all scholars (indeed, all professionals) did not function in each capacity at different times of nearly every day. So the term is problematic if used as a weapon, to disparage scholars who possess specialized knowledge and employ technical language, but it can also have its use if it refers to figures who parlay their standing in a particular area to address broader topics of concern – which is precisely what C. P. Snow sought to do in his Rede Lecture.

But Snow actually poses a challenge as a public intellectual, one that helps to explain the resentment that his pronouncements inspired. When he delivered the Rede Lecture in 1959, Snow's stature rested upon his work as a novelist, and in fact he had not practiced science for nearly a quarter of a century. So his license to speak derived from his literary reputation, yet the enthusiastic reception his lecture met partly owed to his image as a *scientific* intellectual. His standing to pronounce on science was thus wobbly, which is why scientists such as Yudkin and Polanyi so quickly distanced themselves from this man who presumed to speak for them, and why Leavis was tactically correct to aim his fire not at Snow's claims about science, but at his work as a novelist – an assault that Leavis, one of the most distinguished literary critics of the twentieth century, was on solid ground to deliver. So Leavis's attack may have been astonishing in its content and tone, but its focus on Snow's fiction testifies to the fact that its author understood the workings of the function of what we have since come to call a “public intellectual.”