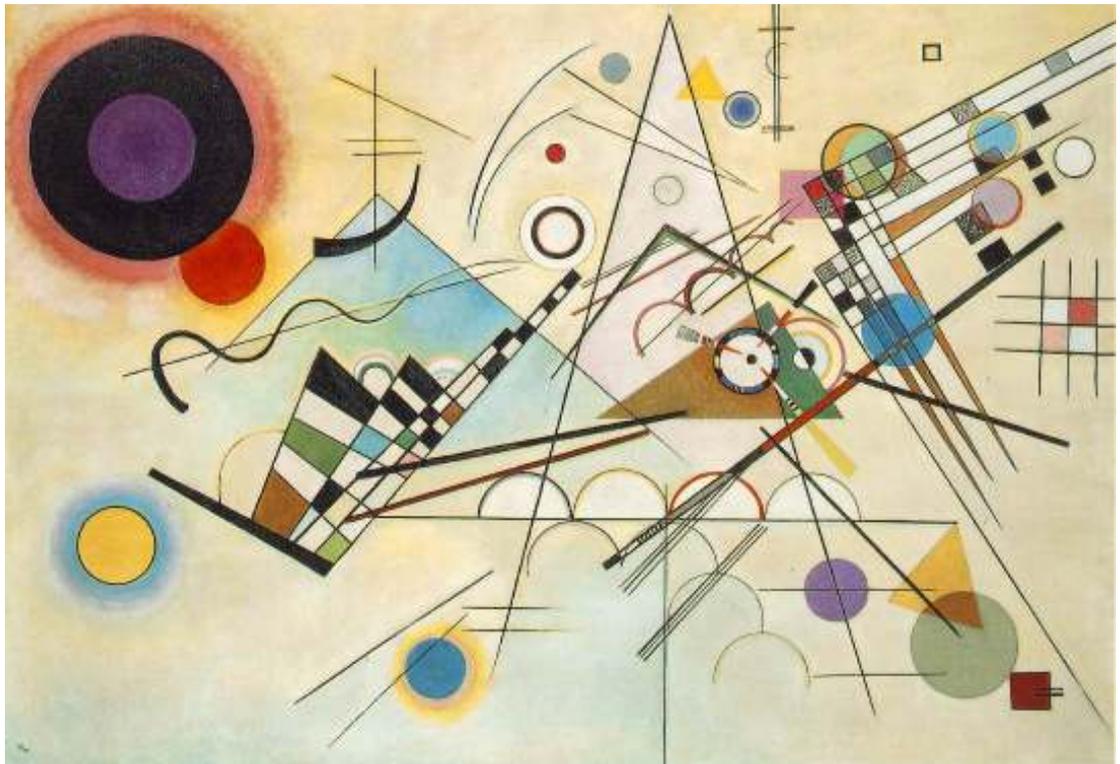


**The Dialectic of Conflict and Culture:
Leon Trotsky and Less Fortunate Statesmen¹**

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It is well known that the phase following the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 (of which Trotsky, my eponymous protagonist, was one of the principal agents), Russia's exit from the Great War at the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 (at which Trotsky was the Soviet Union's chief negotiator), and the eventual Soviet victory in the Civil War which ended in 1921 (throughout which Trotsky was the leader of the Red Army), was one of extreme cultural ferment in the new-born USSR. My interest at the time I first engaged with this period was rather narrow: I was concerned with how it affected the future course of Marxist literary and cultural criticism in Western Europe, particularly, such of it as there was, in England. Today I remain interested in what another look at this period can tell us about the way we negotiate the issues of culture and conflict here and now, in an England that is certainly different, but one that, like almost everywhere else, has even less interest in Marxism than was the case in the nineteen twenties and thirties.

The two decades or so after the October Revolution are commonly characterised as a period which began with notable artistic experimentation. There is no need to go into any great detail about these developments here. Let the image reproduced as Figure 1 stand synecdochically for them.



¹ This article is simultaneously published in Bernard McGuirk and Constance Goh (eds.), *Happiness and Post-Conflict Cultures* (London: Zoilus Press, 2007), pp.116-128.

Figure 1. Wassily Kandinsky, “Composition VIII” (1923)

After the death of Lenin in January 1924 and his supersession by Stalin, this phase of modernist efflorescence gradually turned into its opposite, the rigid, sterile, ideologically slavish practice known, and understandably universally reviled, as Socialist Realism. Let the image reproduced in Figure 2 stand for that.



Figure 2. Arkady Shaikhet, “A Komsomol Youth at the Wheel” (1936)

I do not dislike this photograph or consider it particularly comparable to the painting, excepting the fact that the obviously experimental painting renders any particular reading of meaning or representation ambivalent while the photograph proclaims its own no doubt prescribed obviousness: here we have Soviet youth literally turning the wheel (through a revolution). This perceived shift away from relatively unhindered experimentalism towards enforced ideological dogmatism typifies the received view of Soviet post-conflict culture of the nineteen twenties and thirties, and it is not my intention to challenge that view here, but to indicate what cultural (as opposed to political or military) part Trotsky played in the period. But I also want to articulate, to join up, what I have to say about Trotsky with attention to something closer to home in both place and time.

Whenever one contemplates the dramatic and varied life of someone like Trotsky one cannot help but reflect that contemporary times throw up hardly any examples of his seeming combination of man of action with man of aesthetic inclination and intellectual ability – certainly not in Britain. Here, politicians don't even write their own memoirs, which are ghosted for them (compare Trotsky's *My Life*); at best they produce pulp novels (one thinks of Jeffrey Archer, Douglas Hurd, or Edwina Currie); Gordon Brown, the current British Chancellor of the Exchequer, in an earlier doctoral incarnation, wrote a semi-respectable biography of James Maxton, the Scottish Socialist labour leader, but it does not rank with Trotsky's three-volume *The History of the Russian Revolution*, which was published in English in 1932-33. You have to go back to Churchill before you get anything like that from a British statesman but, although Churchill wrote a noted multi-volume history (*The Second World War*), he did not also have a lot to say about the state of contemporary literature, art and criticism. Trotsky did: and in what follows I shall compare him in this regard to some typical contemporary British Parliamentarians. But before I adjust to these twin foci, I wish to air some more general thoughts, to which I shall return finally, on the relation between conflict and culture.

Trotsky is a proponent of post-conflict culture proper: for him, the culture which might be made possible by the cessation of the conflicts he participated in would be the ultimate triumph of those conflicts. To quote from the introduction to *Literature and Revolution*:

[...] even a successful solution of the elementary problems of food, clothing, shelter, and even of literacy, would in no way signify a complete victory of the new historic principle, that is, of Socialism. Only a movement of scientific thought on a national scale and the development of a new art would signify that the historic seed has not only grown into a plant, but has even flowered. In this sense, the development of art is the highest test of the vitality and significance of each epoch (Trotsky, p. 9).

Coming as it does from the Soviet Commissar of War, that seems a refreshingly congenial endorsement of art and its social importance. It is harder to find a name for what contemporary British Parliamentarians see as the relation between conflict and culture. As we shall find out, they largely envisage "culture" (or a certain kind of "culture") as a means of preventing conflict. It would be nicely symmetrical if we could call this "pre-conflict culture", but as, ideally, culture in this view prevents conflict from occurring, there is no "pre-", there is only an "instead of". However, both positions share a certain structural notion of conflict and culture, in which there is a very obvious culture/good, conflict/bad binary opposition.

Thus, neither party would entertain the extremism of the notorious adage, “When I hear the word ‘culture’ I reach for my gun”. Such a statement entirely reverses the terms of the opposition I have just described (it is now culture/bad, conflict/good), and it will come as no surprise that the statement has a Nazi provenance.² I flag up the quotation here because we shall hear an echo of it, in significantly modified form, from the mouth of a British noble, a little later. What can we call this attitude except “anti-culture conflict”? It is not uncommon. When certain Islamic groups hear the words “American culture” they may indeed reach for their firearms or their *fatwahs*. Others may harbour a less militant but otherwise similar antipathy. But, again, this is in the realm of the specific. It is very rare to find antipathy to culture *as such* in the abstract, and even philistinism is not quite that (it is simply a failure to see the point of culture in general or specific manifestations of culture in particular: it is not necessarily principled opposition to culture). Likewise, hostility to American culture is hardly ever opposition to that culture *per se*, but it indicates a conflict between cultures – what used to be called “culture clash” – in which formulation, I would point out, the opposition between conflict and culture is in fact dissolved: here, culture is the arena of contestation, or it is what you have conflict over. Thus, for example, you are not meant to be able to procure Coca Cola in Cuba or Havana cigars in the USA. Of course, one opposition is here abandoned only for another to be instated, *viz*: our culture is good; theirs is bad, let’s fight it out, by the pen or the sword or, in the case of my last example, by resort to economic sanctions. But “clash of cultures” is a phrase that seems largely to have dropped out of contemporary parlance, replaced by “cultural difference”, a term which attempts to restore all cultures to an equivalence (i.e. non-opposed, non-conflictual), *viz*: we have our culture; they have theirs; they are different, but equal or incommensurable.

The other body of thought I can identify as contributing to this constellation is the Marxist one. It argues that culture, in a capitalist economy, does not deliver us from conflict. We are *always* in conflict, and there will be no true culture until we are beyond conflict. It does not matter what you think of this position. My point is that, logically, it renders the term “post-conflict culture” tautologous. Culture is the reward we shall enjoy only after the cessation of conflict, and conflict is virtually co-extensive with capitalism. Not surprisingly, this Marxist note signals the true entry of Trotsky into my discussion.

Literature and Revolution is seen by many as a bizarre and indeed politically irresponsible aberration of Trotsky’s. Why? Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky’s most famous biographer, sets the scene:

In the summer of 1922, when he refused to accept the office of Vice-Premier under Lenin and, incurring the Politbureau’s censure, went on leave, he devoted the better part of his holiday to literary criticism. The State Publishers had collected his pre-revolutionary essays on literature for republication in a special volume of his *Works*; and he intended to write a preface surveying the condition of Russian letters since the revolution. The “preface” grew in size and became an independent work. He gave to it nearly all his leisure but failed to conclude it. He resumed writing during his next summer holiday, in 1923, when his conflict with the triumvirs, complicated by the expectation of

² “Wenn ich ‘Kultur’ höre, entsichere ich meinen Browning!” is a remark usually attributed to Hermann Goering, but in fact it is a quotation from Hanns Johst’s *Schlageter*, a play first performed in celebration of Adolf Hitler’s forty-fourth birthday: see Hanns Johst, *Schlageter*, Schauspiel (Munich: A. Langen/G. Müller, 1933).

revolution in Germany, was mounting to a climax; and this time he returned to Moscow with the manuscript of a new book, *Literature and Revolution*, ready for the printer. (Deutscher, p. 164)

In other words, Trotsky failed to seize the political position which might have enabled him to achieve the official adoption of the cultural policies implied by *Literature and Revolution* (had he become Vice-Premier it would have been automatically easier for him to succeed Lenin) and instead absented himself from the intense political fray so that he could adumbrate those very policies. As a political miscalculation, this is second in notoriety only to his later weekend wild duck-shooting trip, taken in November 1923, when Stalin's machinations against him were at their height. The adventure laid him up with a malarial infection that rendered him largely *hors de combat* during the crucial following months, leaving the field virtually clear for Stalin to assume the succession.

Nonetheless, the implied cultural policies of *Literature and Revolution* remain on record. One must remember that a great deal of thinking about literature and criticism in Bolshevik circles was influenced by Lenin's articles on Tolstoy (published between 1908 and 1911), in which, in a manner reminiscent of Marx and Engels on Balzac and Goethe, Lenin argued that Tolstoy overcame the limitations of his own class ideology by transferring his loyalty to the Russian peasantry in the revolution of 1905. The sharp contemporaneousness of Lenin's focus is a feature that Trotsky's book shares; but where he differs from Lenin is in his refusal strictly to align aesthetic judgments with fairly immediate political purposes. The dangers of this Leninist position come to the fore most strongly in Lenin's essay, "Party Organisation and Party Literature" (1905), which with apparent liberality admits that "everyone is free to write and say whatever he likes, without any restrictions", but reserves the quite illiberal right to expel from the Bolshevik Party those whose exercise of this freedom brings them into conflict with the party line. It is clear in the essay that Lenin's strictures may be applied to creative writers as well as political commentators and interventionists (Lenin [1965], 44-49. Lenin justified such a policy because the Bolshevik Party was a "voluntary association" whose ideological integrity needed to be protected if it was to achieve its historical aims. Once it had achieved those aims, however, and actually become the governing party in 1917, a little later making itself indissociable from the state, such a policy applied to literature was indisputably potentially repressive.

Yet it is perfectly clear that the evaluation of literature according to its political tendency was never originally intended by culture-inclined Bolsheviks to preclude other kinds of evaluation or to necessitate what eventually took place under Stalin – intensifying censorship, rigid prescriptivism for writers prepared to toe the line, and systematic liquidation or geographical banishment of those who were not. In Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* all the best possibilities of artistic tolerance were promoted alongside the recognition that "it is silly, absurd, stupid to the highest degree, to pretend that art will remain indifferent to the convulsions of our epoch" (Trotsky, p. 12). Unreservedly suspicious of philistine attempts to reject the achievements of bourgeois art, to impose a "proletarian culture" in its place, and to exercise widespread repression in the cultural field, Trotsky undertook a vigorous and trenchant survey of the contemporary state of Russian literature from his undeniably partisan position as one of the architects of the revolution. Insofar as government was concerned, he stated:

Our policy in art, during a transitional period, can and must be to help the various groups and schools of art which have come over to the revolution to grasp correctly the historic meaning of the Revolution, and to allow them complete freedom of self-determination in the field of art, after putting before them the categorical standard of being for or against the Revolution. (Trotsky, p. 14)

The position may seem characteristically contradictory. Once writers have “come over to the revolution”, and once they have been helped to “grasp correctly” its historic meaning, they will be allowed “complete freedom of self-determination”. But what if they do not “come over”, or what if they do but fail to “grasp correctly” the revolution’s “historic meaning”, or, even if they do both, what if their allegiance to and “correct” understanding of the revolution later flags or is otherwise found wanting by those who consider themselves empowered to judge? The implications are obviously anxiety-provoking to liberal democratic sentiment. Yet Trotsky’s position goes to the heart of the debate about literature and politics. If literature has no political effectivity, but is merely a concern of hobbyists, then it can be left well alone by the state. But if it does indeed have an appreciable role in shaping a society, it would be a foolish government that did not keep an eye on and attempt to control its workings – and, indeed, many liberal democratic governments have imposed censorship and repression precisely out of a recognition of literature’s perceived social effectivity. If it happens that the best known cases in the “free world” are to do with the sexual rather than political content of literary texts – from the bowdlerization of Shakespeare to the banning of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* – all that is demonstrated thereby is that liberal governments have considered public discussion or dramatization of sexual mores to be a powerful social force requiring their vigilant control in much the same way as the Soviets came to consider expressions of political “deviance” a threat to October. Inimical as all writers and most readers understandably are to such control, where it is present it is clear that literature is not politically underestimated.

It is simply not true in any case that democratic governments do not prohibit literary texts which depart from what one might call the “party bottom line”. How many are aware that Joseph Goebbels, that other notable statesman who was a man of action and a man of aesthetic inclination and intellectual ability, wrote a novel called *Michael*?³ The answer is probably not many, because in present day democratic Germany it is still on the prohibited list along with Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. It doesn’t toe the “democratic bottom line” and none of us is losing any sleep over its state-sanctioned repression. Closer to home, and closer in time, Edward Bond’s anarchic play *Early Morning* was refused a public performance licence as recently as 1968 because, among other things, it depicted Queen Victoria as a lesbian, a murderer and a cannibal.

If these comments enable us to put the somewhat bothersome problem of potential textual censorship and repression on political grounds in brackets, then Trotsky strikes me as the only twentieth century politician of major historical importance who has shown anything like a grasp of the indispensability and potency of cultural production and a willingness, given those propensities and capacities, to encourage it to flourish as freely as possible. One has to remember the tremulous fragility of the October Revolution almost up to the eve of his writing the book, as

³ Goebbels, Joseph. (1936). *Michael: Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern*. Munich: F. Eber nachf.

well as the stormy political environment in which he moved (note his qualification that his remarks applied only to the “transitional period” of the revolution: they were not meant to apply to an established and consolidated state of affairs). It is somewhat easier, in times of peace and plenty, for ruling liberal bourgeois politicians to let artists say whatever they like, not least because, under examination, they ironically turn out, in my view, to be more thoroughgoing materialists than Trotsky ever was. That is to say, whereas the Trotsky who wrote *Literature and Revolution* was the one who argued that the acid test of an economic revolution was whether or not it ultimately delivered in the realm of culture (which in my view, contrary to all popular conception, is the classic Marxist position), the acid test of culture, for liberal bourgeois politicians, is whether or not it delivers in the realm of economics. This latter conclusion I hope to demonstrate in the remainder of this essay, and so I now turn, as promised, to what I have called those “less fortunate” statesmen.

Late one evening in the January of 1989, I learned that the familiar and time-honoured term “Cultural Relations” had been replaced in official British political discourse by the phrase “Cultural Diplomacy”. I was listening to the BBC radio programme *Today in Parliament*, which reported that the House of Lords had debated a motion calling for increased government funding for the British Council and the BBC’s external services (particularly the World Service, which broadcasts to foreign territories worldwide). These are two main agencies of Britain’s overseas cultural representation, and both had recently suffered financial cuts in real terms under the Thatcher government. The entire (and entirely astonishing) debate can be found in the official Parliamentary record.⁴

To be fair, some of the noble Lords expressed dislike for the new designation – Lord St. John of Fawsley (then better known as the Rt. Hon. Norman St. John Stevas, Conservative ex-Minister for the Arts) thought that “Cultural Diplomacy” had a “forbidding ring” – but they grudgingly took it up. Lord Bonham-Carter, the Liberal peer proposing the motion, wasted no time in launching a strategic military metaphor, referring within five minutes to the external services of the BBC as “an essential weapon in our armoury”. He gave a stirring example of how, shortly before the Falklands War, the BBC’s broadcasts to Spain had been cut, with the result that Spain’s coverage of the War came almost entirely from Argentinian sources. The amount saved by this cut had been £230,000 – “rather less,” he ventured, “than the cost of a single Exocet missile”. All around Lord Bonham-Carter, parliamentary minds started to whirr into characteristic British warspeakmode. The Earl of Stockton, Harold Macmillan, ex-Prime Minister and then Director of the Macmillan Publishing Group, which has always profited greatly from the British Council’s promotion of British books overseas, said that in supporting calls for increased government funding he was “speaking from the sharp end of the publishing salient” (a salient is a military fortification or line of defences which points outwards). Lord Weidenfeld (another publisher, of Weidenfeld and Nicolson fame) piped up with the idea that cultural diplomacy was “an excellent conduit for reconciliation and peace” in the hostilities he seemed convinced Britain was involved in: “it heals wounds and builds bridges”. He ardently hoped that, by the nineties, assuming increased funding for the British Council, Britain’s involvement in belligerence around the globe would be at an end and that our motto would be, “If I hear the word ‘gun’, I reach for my culture” (a quaint inversion of the Nazi *bons mots* we encountered earlier, although the noble lord wrongly attributed it to Goering because he dredged it up from the *Penguin*

⁴*House of Lords Weekly Hansard*, no. 2379, cols. 209-46. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in this section are taken from this text.

Dictionary of Quotations). Lord Moore of Wolvercote also hit the target when he repeated what nearly every other peer had said, namely that the universality of the English language gave Britain a ready-made market: “from that base we have various weapons with which to press our cultural offensive”.

In this fashion, the Lords harangued the government for two-and-a-half hours, like Generals come back from the field to sort out the bureaucrats who were holding up supplies. It became clear that there was indeed a foreign war of sorts going on, which had to be fought on two fronts. There was the Influence Front, on which a Britain sadly dispossessed of Empire must scramble anew for cultural colonies, in the teeth of fierce competition from the other Western capitalist nations and from the “unfree” world (which then meant Communist countries). The Influence Front had to be secured if Britain was to be successful on the Trade Front, where there was (and no doubt still is and for any foreseeable future always will be) a frenzied struggle going on to flog everything from aeroplanes to zoom lenses in foreign markets.

An obvious instance raised in the debate of how the Trade Front cannot neglect the Influence Front is in the markets created abroad when foreign students educated in Britain return to take up influential positions in their countries of origin. But how can you get people to come and study here when they haven’t learned English because the British Council hasn’t enough resources to teach them; when they can’t hear BBC broadcasts demonstrating how marvellous Britain’s culture is, because of poor signals, outdated relay equipment, or sheer absence of a service; when the number of scholarships offered to overseas students is inadequate, and their tuition fees are going through the roof? And so on. This is where the “civilising” quality of “British culture” is usually deployed, because, naturally, it would not do to advertise straight out what a commercial coup you stand to effect on foreign nations who allow themselves to fall under your influence. At this point in the debate was heard a tactically evangelical maiden speech by the Conservative ex-Minister for the Arts. Cultural diplomacy, he averred, is simply “the increase of British influence in the wider world”, and yet:

This increase is not pursued principally for commercial or economic reasons, but because we believe the long, continuous, extraordinarily rich and varied experience of this nation constitutes a unique contribution to the welfare of mankind, and we are therefore under a duty to make it as widely available as possible.

If I were asked what had been this country’s three greatest contributions to world civilisation I should reply unhesitatingly: the common law, parliamentary government, English language and literature, and at the heart of all three lies the idea of liberty. I do not believe that we can export our institutions indiscriminately, but by informing people of how they work and flourish, by imparting thoughts about them, we can enhance the chances for freedom elsewhere.

Listening to this on radio, so boundlessly confident was the delivery, one was almost tempted to disregard the strangeness of the argument. Our legal, political and cultural institutions are all about liberty, so we have a duty to press them on everybody else. To force people to be free Britain cannot use gunboats as it used to, so it has to resort to convenient arks such as “English language and literature”. We should count ourselves lucky, because we invented English, and know how to use it:

The benefits of the universality of that language are truly incalculable. I often reflect on the extraordinary disposition of Divine Providence that a language spoken originally by a few thousand savages trapped on a fog-encrusted island on the edge of the North Sea should, in the fullness of time, and in the era of communications, become the common language for the entire world [...]

Culture may seem a frail boat to embark on the tempestuous waters of great power and international diplomacy. What has that quiet, nuanced voice to say in the world of telegrams and anger? – I think rather more than one might suppose [...]

Let me say this in conclusion: worldly powers, dynasties, empires rise and fall, culture and learning abide. They are the achievements by which future ages looking back assess the value of previous generations. Power in the 19th century sense has passed from us, never to return. But it has been replaced by something perhaps even more important – influence. Through the dissemination of our culture that influence can be exercised for the good.

This was a hybrid tale of the fertile Noah (the frail boat), delivered in the cadences of Ecclesiastes (“empires rise and fall, culture and learning abide”), told by St. John the Divine. Whatever one’s political persuasion, it would be difficult not to admit that the sentence, “What has that quiet, nuanced voice to say in the world of telegrams and anger?” approaches the condition of the poetic. It is arguably two lines of iambic pentameter blank verse. Most of the noble assembly no doubt attended in hypnotised wonderment.

But the proposing Lord (Bonham-Carter) had not asked for poetry: he only wanted cash for the British Council and the BBC. Perhaps he was aware (unlike St. John) that God, actually, was responsible for the confusion of the tongues in the first place (Genesis, xi). At any rate, the only bibliolatry he was interested in was the kind that would profit the Earl of Stockton and Lord Weidenfeld. Sadly, English will not reach foreigners along the effortless route of Divine Providence any more. We have to teach them it. And if we do not, there are American cowboys who will: their Lordships were reminded by Lord Bonham-Carter that “there is a battle going on about the teaching of English English and American English” because, “believe it or not, the Americans claim to be able to speak English”.

If you are taught English English you are likely to buy books and other goods from this country: if you are taught American English you are likely to buy books and other goods from the United States of America. [Cultural diplomacy] is therefore an important commercial consideration and one which should not be forgotten.

This was a blunt and belated formulation of a sense of demise. We may have invented English, but the patent ran out years ago, and we perhaps need to remind ourselves that Britain builds very few boats these days. So, alas, the plea was to no avail. Naturally, in that straitened post-credit-boom heading-towards-the-Thatcher-sunset year of 1989, the cash just was not on the table for Lord Bonham-Carter’s cause, no matter how ardently he argued the case for overseas cultural representation being part of the diplomatic service.

It seemed to me at the time, and it still does, that it was a sign of the increasingly frank recognition of the inescapably political nature of cultural work that Whitehall should have accepted the re-designation of “Cultural Relations” to “Cultural Diplomacy”. Of course, it always was starkly political, even when it was called “Cultural Relations”. But the new term caught on very rapidly in the immediately ensuing years. Perform a search today on Google for “cultural

diplomacy” and you will come up with an appreciable number of Masters programmes offered by British and American higher education institutions. Its other recurrent surfacing is in the pages of *Hansard*, the publication of the proceedings of the two chambers of the UK Parliament. For example, as recently as 19 March 2001, there is an exchange like this:

Lord Puttnam: My Lords, is the Minister aware of the fact that in 1995 a conference was held in London under the title “Britain and the World”, at which the Foreign Secretary, Mr Cook, the then Foreign Secretary, the noble Lord, Lord Hurd, and the then Prime Minister, Mr John Major, all confirmed unequivocally that cultural diplomacy represented the best value for money in presenting Britain to the rest of the world? Has anything happened in the past six years that would allow Mr Cook to think that that is no longer true?

Baroness Scotland of Asthal: My Lords, absolutely not. It is incredibly good value. Britain’s creative sector, including music, design and advertising, generates more than £112.5 billion each year and employs more than 3.3 million people. It is growing faster than the economy as a whole: in 1997-98 it was growing at 16 per cent a year. Exports total £10.3 billion. It is a very vibrant sector, of which we are rightly and justly proud.

This exchange not only demonstrates that British Parliamentarians are impressively telepathic (Baroness Scotland was able to read Robin Cook’s mind, despite the fact that he was not even a member of the House of Lords, and thus was not present during this debate): more sinisterly, note how Puttnam’s “cultural diplomacy” is simply equated by Baroness Scotland to “Britain’s creative sector” and that the only terms in which it is lauded are economic.

Ultimately, such overseas culture-mongering has always been directed towards the process of consolidating the already powerful economic position of Britain in the global economy. Even before the 1989 Parliamentary debate as I have summarised it, the late Sir Anthony Parsons (former Foreign Policy adviser to Margaret Thatcher), had stated this without disguise, and had been quoted with approval by the British Council, in terms which can conclude any case for the thoroughgoing materialism at the heart of the British political establishment:

It is really dazzlingly obvious. If you are thoroughly familiar with someone else’s language and literature, if you know and love the country, the arts, the people, you will be instinctively disposed to buy goods from them rather than a less well-known source, to support them actively when you consider them to be right and to avoid criticizing them too fiercely when you regard them as being in the wrong.⁵

The juxtaposition of an individual of world renown and his capacious views on literature and culture and their potential for human liberation with a comparatively indifferently talented bunch of unelected politicians and quango-masters mouthing pious nationalist banalities on the relations between trade and commodifiable cultural artefacts is, no doubt, the throw of a loaded dice. Can anyone who truly believes in the social value of culture consider Trotsky the loser from this comparison? This we

⁴ The British Council Overseas Career Service [British Council staff recruitment brochure] (London: The British Council, 1988), p. 7.

can ask even before we draw attention to the ironies which result from the contrast, such as the spectacle of Trotsky, the thoroughgoing communist, recommending what one might call a “regulated free market” approach to culture, while apparently liberal bourgeois lords try desperately to pressgang cultural endeavour into the narrow service of enhanced balance of trade figures, a manoeuvre that makes them seem a little Stalinist, in the sense that Stalin also attempted – much more successfully than they – to extend state patronage to culture as long as it knelt at the feet of narrow economic and ideological dictates.

However, such observations are far from my main purpose in here co-locating these ostensibly disparate attempts to construct and project cultural policies. To juxtapose them may raise questions and prompt conclusions about the general relations between conflict and culture. I suggest that a predictable dialectic of supply and demand is at work between them. Conflicts of the kind that Trotsky and the nascent Soviet Union had survived at the time he was writing were deeply privative. Russia in the years before the Great War was already a materially poor peasant society, whose culture (in the sense of high or artistic culture) was accessible only to a very restricted élite. The War, the February and October Revolutions, and the subsequent Civil War all put culture (in this specific sense) into a suspension even more extreme – who can engage in artistic pursuits or pleasures or enjoy their potentially edifying consequences amidst an absolutely shattered material infrastructure and within a mercurial polity (from which the culturally inclined classes understandably, if they could, tried to escape)? What may explain Trotsky’s apparent irresponsibility in turning to literary debates in 1922 was his sense that only with reference to cultural practices and their potential benefits did the privations suffered in the immediately preceding years seem worthwhile: *Literature and Revolution* may have been intended as a timely clarion call (from someone to whom everyone, friend or foe, would certainly have to pay attention) to see the point of it all.

One might feel, by comparison, rather sorry for well-fed-and-feathered politicians plying their trade in times of apparent relative material plenty and peace. Few grand gestures seem possible in such un-Renaissance-like circumstances, when there is an uninhibited plethora of cultural choices and practices to choose from. At best, all that seems possible then to the official political mind is petty calculation. If anything, such a situation seems to lead politicians implicitly or explicitly to turn the important question on its head, to ask what the point of culture is, and to come up with justifications for it which are stultifyingly pragmatic (it wins us friends abroad) or banally economic (“an important commercial consideration and one which should not be forgotten”; “the best value for money in representing Britain to the rest of the world”; “growing faster than the economy as a whole”). Culture is at such a moment even susceptible, as we have seen, to redesignation in econospeak as the “creative sector” to which one can apply income generation figures and with reference to which one can calculate a national contribution to gainful employment.

If this supply-and-demand thesis seems justified, it may tell us why the notion of post-conflict cultures is so important – because it is perhaps when cultural practices are allowed to come back into the light after enforced benightedness that they are most valued and understood, and have their greatest capacity to make people happy.

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