

## Revisiting the Two Cultures

A Book Review of  
THE TWO CULTURES. By Snow, C. P. London: Cambridge University  
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In April 2016, Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, gave a concise explanation of quantum computing at a theoretical physics research institute. Both academia and the media welcomed the ease with which the literature graduate engaged with cutting edge scientific research (Butterworth, 2016). In May 1959, at a similar public event, another public figure called for bridging the widening gap between scientists and “literary intellectuals.” The event was the annual Rede lecture at the University of Cambridge and the speaker was influential physical chemist and novelist Charles Percy Snow.

As a scientist, CP Snow had collaborated with Lord Rutherford in the Cavendish Laboratory, beginning in 1928. CP Snow gained greater recognition as a novelist in the 1930s and later in public office, becoming (among other things) the United Kingdom’s government spokesperson on technology in the House of Lords in 1964. But it was CP Snow’s Rede lecture of 1959 and the public debate it spawned that gave him prominence in science and public policy, and continues to generate discussion even half a century later. The fiftieth anniversary printing of *The Two Cultures* with an introduction by Stefan Collini gives us an opportunity to revisit CP Snow’s notion that our society is threatened by a “destructive” lack of understanding between two “cultures” (Snow, 2012, p. 5).

The title of Snow’s lecture was “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution.” He lamented how the practitioners of the two “cultures”—the scientists and the “literary intellectuals”—had “ceased to communicate at all” and how this had become “a problem of the entire West” (Snow, 2012, pp. 2-3). On the one hand, non-scientists felt that scientists were “shallowly optimistic” about the future and the other hand, scientists believed that non-scientists lacked sufficient “foresight” (Snow, 2012, p. 5). His biggest accusation is that “literary intellectuals” are “natural Luddites” (Snow, 2012, p. 22).

The ensuing controversies regarding Snow's analysis of the then scenario need not concern us presently.<sup>1</sup> We are of course still confronted by his anxiety that "there is no place where the cultures meet" (Snow, 2012, p.16), though to a lesser extent today. In the introduction, for example, Collini invites us "to think in terms of *degrees* of participation" (Snow, 2012, p. lvii) while keeping in mind that Snow conceptualized science (perhaps naively) as part of a "freer . . . [and] democratic" culture (Snow, 2012, p. 48) while scientific research today is less "freer" driven more by the "commercial strategies of . . . companies" (Snow, 2012, p. lxxv).

Snow was confident that "applied science has made it possible to remove unnecessary suffering" and that "industrialization is the only hope for the poor" (Snow, 2012, pp. 25, 78). He also submits that it is the responsibility of the West to infuse capital and trained human-power to bring about the "transformation" of the less industrialized countries and reduce the gap between the rich and the poor (Snow, 2012, p. 44). This deterministic prescription of (Western) scientific "modernization" as being essential for human development had been later undermined—the "Green Revolution" of the 1960s, where Western world promised the "transformation" of agriculture in India, has unfortunately left behind a trail of scarcity and ecological devastation (Shiva, 1991). And while Snow continued advocating the benefits of scientific progress, the distrust of science only increased in the decades following his lecture: with the devastation caused by nuclear weapons and climate change.

We know today that cultural, social, and political practices are as important as scientific progress if we are to alleviate human suffering. Snow's recommendation for educating a "community, who know enough science to have a sense of what the scientists are talking about" is perhaps the least argued aspect of his lecture, but arguably the most important today (Snow, 2012, p. 38). The human right to participate in and enjoy the benefits of scientific progress has not received adequate attention from both scientists and "literary intellectuals". In addition, revisiting Snow's lecture today can persuade us to rethink science policy guided by human rights principles, albeit different from "commercial interests, the interests of scientists, or national scientific competitiveness" (Chapman & Wyndham, 2013). Snow's invitation for public engagement of scientists and non-scientists has been echoed elsewhere by Bijker who proposed that science, technology and society (STS) scholars can play the role of public intellectuals for developing democratic politics (Bijker, 2003).

Snow believed that people trained in science and technology will be better prepared to take political decisions in the modern world. Despite his technological determinism, it was his illumination of the gulf between the two cultures, which created a need to develop a common language. As Snow insisted, the "clashing point" for the two

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading on the controversies surrounding CP Snow's lecture, see Cornelius, D. & St. Vincent, E. (1964). *Cultures in conflict*. Chicago: Scott, Foresman.

cultures offers creative opportunities (Snow, 2012, p. 16) and we now witness a greater willingness to include social scientists in global and regional scientific bodies and increased enthusiasm to identify creative and social innovations at the margins (Heffernan, 2016; Gupta, 2016). As David Dickson (2009) points out, “The real cultural divide is . . . between those whose beliefs are fundamentalist, projecting either the value or dangers of modern science as absolute truths, and those who see science as a necessary but not sufficient condition of human progress.”

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