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The postmodern university revisited: reframing higher education debates from the 'two cultures' to postmodernity

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Current debate on higher education in Britain is focused on its instrumental functions and largely ignores its social and cultural value. This paper considers the 'idea of the university' in an historical perspective and critically examines current policy discourse while identifying robust alternatives to the utilitarian argument. It proposes, speculatively, the notion of 'cosmopolitanism', as defined by critics of pluralism and postmodernism, as a more meaningful starting point for philosophical and policy discussions.

Introduction

Since the Robbins Report (1963), the British Government has focused on *how best* to expand higher education, with a prevailing view that it should be progressively opened to all. However, the process of change and expansion has been uneven, non-linear and disproportionately structural as opposed to philosophical or ideological (Scott, 1995, pp. 1–2). While the just and equitable goal of increasing participation and opportunity in higher education has enjoyed a consensus for much of the post-war era, the expansion has taken place without clear agreement on the role of the university (or, more broadly, higher education) in a late modern—or postmodern—democratic, capitalist society.[1] Instead, higher education policy debates revolve around the systemic and procedural, centring on issues of organizational structure, capacity and resource allocation (Barnett, 1990, p. 26; see, for example, Morris & Sizer, 1982; Shattock & Rigby, 1983; Lockwood & Davies, 1985; Loder, 1990;

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Warner & Crosthwaite, 1995). As others such as Ronald Barnett have noted (2000, p. 26), the historically vigorous and heated debate about the 'wider aims of the university' is conspicuously absent from the present political or popular discourse. As I will argue in this article, the absence of such discourse has created a breach in policy discourse into which an excessively utilitarian, technical and essentially 'postmodern' sensibility has ascended.

Increasingly, the Government's expressed purpose for higher education expansion is to supply well-trained workers for a dynamic, 'knowledge-based' economy in a global marketplace, a policy 'underpinned by a sense of long-term [economic and competitive] crisis' (Hayward, 2004, p. 3). In 2003, then-Secretary of Education Charles Clarke stated that the 'wider non-economic benefits [of higher education] are overrated … universities exist to enable the British economy and society to deal with the challenges posed by the increasingly rapid process of global change' (quoted in Mayhew *et al.*, 2004, p. 69). The emphasis on 'education for skills', however, is not only evident in tertiary education circles; the concept pervades the goals of elementary and secondary school policy in both Britain and the US, where the National Curriculum and No Child Left Behind Act, respectively, place particular emphasis on achieving progress through measures of students' basic literacy and numeracy skills. In one respect, the move to mass higher education in Britain represents a progressive goal of extending economic opportunity to individuals who must compete in a capitalist marketplace closely tied to democratic political participation; in another, a higher education system *overly* focused on skills-based learning may fail to facilitate, for example, 'the development and growth of individuals capable of leading fulfilling and responsible lives and who have a reflexive grasp of what is in the best interests of themselves, their families, their communities and their society'(Taylor *et al.*, 2002, p. 161). In this article, I critically examine the modern meaning of the 'wider aims of the university' from an historical perspective in order to do two things: first, to understand the context and development of today's apparent policy consensus on skills and utility in higher education, and second, to use that understanding to point debates about higher education in a more fruitful direction, and one that includes *substantive* discussion about its social and cultural role.

The most appropriate place to start in a discussion of the recent history of debate about the social role of the university in Britain is with the well-known 'Two cultures' exchange (1959–1962) between Cambridge English professor F. R. Leavis (1895–1978) and the scientist/popular novelist C. P. Snow (1905–1980). This discourse established a useful, if crude, summary of the two competing schools of thought about how the modern university ought to operate.[2] Leavis's idea of the 'English school' represented a particular (and rather narrow) conception of what might be labeled the 'liberal humanist' notion of higher education. The philosophy at its most basic level is a belief in the value of knowledge without immediate application; in other words, it is a faith in the intrinsic value of a university education to produce reflective, responsible citizens free from political, military, bureaucratic or market demands in a modern industrial society (see Moore, 2004, chapter 3). The present predominance of what might be called the 'postmodern' or 'instrumentalist'

idea of the university—consistent with Secretary Clarke's view that sees the university and wider higher education system as purely instrumental, as service provider and knowledge producer, for the socio-economic benefit of the individual and society—is strikingly different from the liberal humanist university as conceived in most of western history and culture (see Smith & Webster, 1997; Barnett, 2000, 2004; Taylor *et al.*, 2002). It is this sort of instrumentalism which Snow's original 'Two cultures' (1959) lecture anticipated.

Thus, a critical look at the Snow–Leavis exchange in historical perspective allows one to consider *how* and *why* mainstream higher education discourse has changed since the early 1960s, when the institutional shift to mass participation and increased access began in earnest. If an instrumentalist view like that of Secretary Clarke is truly ascendant today, then it may be useful for those who still retain a belief in the liberal humanist university tradition to examine why Leavis's argument, and that of other liberal humanists, has fallen out of favour. More specifically, why does Leavis's liberal humanism appear, rightly so, as elitist and dated? Why might Snow's progressivism and scientific optimism have been so appealing, politically and socially, in the 1960s and 1970s? The answers to these questions are best understood by framing the Snow–Leavis exchange in its proper historical context: that is, just prior to the ascendance of pluralist political movements based on gender, race and ethnicity. Though the 'Two cultures' lecture and the Leavis response has been widely discussed in academic circles since the 1960s (Collini, 1993), it has largely been so as a cultural phenomenon not explicitly tied to any long-term policy movements. It is my hope that by reconsidering this exchange in its proper historical context that its implications for higher education may be more fully examined, including the role of Snow and Leavis as *historical* actors, by now at least once-removed from today's political and social context. In particular, it is important to consider how the political success of pluralism and multiculturalism transformed the way in which we view the university as a social and cultural object; in understanding its effect on current trends in higher education, we can begin to more critically examine the current mode and whether it is desirable or not. Consequently, I will review the Snow–Leavis exchange and its historical perception as a way to consider the role of pluralist politics in retrospective judgments of its opposing worldviews.

Finally, I will argue that the notion of pluralism may be primarily responsible for discouraging discussion about the social and cultural role of the university—a discussion which seems to have become politically taboo across the political spectrum. Those supportive of pluralist movements may be dismayed to learn that, paradoxically, its success has led to an overly utilitarian higher education policy to which those very same pluralists might be opposed—that is, one stripped of social and cultural elements, and which facilitates the development of an increasingly market-based, consumerist and less egalitarian society. In considering the historical development of higher education debates since the 'Two cultures', I propose an intentionally speculative and provocative new foundation for such debates. Borrowing from David Hollinger's (1995) concept of 'post-ethnicity', I offer the notion of cosmopolitanism, as opposed to pluralism, and suggest the need for 'commonality'

in university work, as articulated by Habermas (1987). These two concepts, cosmopolitanism and commonality, might serve as the starting point for a refreshing debate about higher education—one that allows for a 'third way' of sorts between the prejudice and exclusion of cultural elitism and the intellectual void of cultural indifference. My hope is to illuminate a different set of choices available to those responsible for thinking about higher education.

'Two cultures': The Luddite *vs.* The technocrat

> Intellectuals, in particular literary intellectuals, are natural *Luddites*.
> (C. P. Snow, 1993, p. 22)

> [According to C. P. Snow], if you need insist on the need for any other kind of concern entailing forethought, action and provision, about the human future—any other kind of misgiving—than that which talks in terms of productivity, material standards of living, hygienic and technological progress, then you are a *Luddite*. (F. R. Leavis, 1972a, p. 52)

As the storm surrounding the label of 'Luddite' suggests, the row between Snow and Leavis hinged on an interpretation of the industrial revolution in English history (Collini, 1993; also see Barnett, 1986, chapter 10). Snow, the optimist, implied that backward-looking literary intellectuals like Leavis had failed to embrace its dynamic potential for economic, political and social change. Leavis, on the other hand, asserted that technophiles like Snow had failed to grasp its 'human cost' (Collini, 1993, pp. xxxiv–xxxv). At the heart of the controversy was the question of the English universities' response (or lack thereof) to the transformative power of industrialism.

England, Snow said, was 'not coping with the scientific revolution': 'Why are other countries doing it better? How are we going to meet our future? Both our cultural and practical future?'(1993, p. 33). Part of the problem, he suggested, was the ascendancy of an 'intellectualism' that had either ignored or misunderstood the need for scientific progress, instead pursuing a stale programme of cultural and literary study that was irrelevant to the real social needs of modern Britons. 'Most of our fellow human beings', Snow said of the world's poor, 'are underfed and die before their time. In the crudest terms, *that* is the social condition' (ibid., p. 7). Scientists, by nature, are not content with the 'tragic' nature of man's 'individual condition' but instead are pro-active in seeking to better his 'social condition' (ibid., p. 6). Their primary failing, Snow suggested, might be characterized as an overabundance of enthusiasm and goodwill.

Literary intellectuals, he charged, are on the other hand part of a tradition that has never adapted well to social change: 'Literature changes more slowly than science. It hasn't the same automatic corrective, and so its misguided periods are longer' (ibid., p. 8). But conservatism and introversion were sometimes more than benign by-products of 'traditional' culture; at their most insidious, according to Snow, they were the learned practices of an often selfish, elitist class of intellectuals who routinely assumed a defensive and duplicitous posture towards industrialization in general. Meanwhile, 'far-sighted men' in the sciences realized that 'the country needed to train some of its bright minds in science, particularly in applied science' (ibid.). In

this sense, Snow's concern for British competitiveness rested on a wider concern for capturing the nation's potential for human capital that pervaded education debates in general and concerned itself with finding, and then properly training, any able citizen regardless of class or social status (see Jackson & Marsden, 1962; Barnett, 1986, chapter 10; McCulloch, 1994, chapter 3; also Moore, 2004, chapter 2).

Moreover, according to Snow, scientists were part of a wholly different culture than that of literary intellectuals, guardians of the 'traditional' culture. Whether they knew it or not, he said, 'they had the future in their bones' (1993, p. 4). Literary intellectuals, while not as ideologically unified, nevertheless possessed a troubling 'unscientific' attitude that bordered on 'anti-scientific' hostility (ibid., p. 5). It was this traditional culture, Snow asserted, 'to an extent remarkably little diminished by the emergence of the scientific one, which manages the western world'; and forward-looking scientists working for the good of humanity were the oppressed victims of such hegemony (ibid.; also see Collini, 1993, pp. xxii–xxiv).

Gross generalizations about scientists and literary intellectuals aside, Snow asserted that the more urgent problem in higher education was the lack of meaningful communication between said scientists and intellectuals. Indeed, the apparent 'gulf of incomprehension', as Snow called it, was beneficial to neither group and particularly humourless in the face of world poverty and suffering which could be mitigated (1993, p. 4). Intellectuals, as the influential leaders of the ancient universities, had fallen into a 'moral trap', giving into the temptation 'to sit back, complacent in one's unique tragedy, and let others go without a meal' (ibid., p. 7). Thus, Snow had provocatively drawn the parameters of a serious debate about the relationship between the universities and society with a suggestion of, if not radical, at least insistent progressive change.

The 'Two cultures' in context

The immediate reaction to Snow's lecture, subsequently published in two installments in the journal *Encounter* (June and July 1959) was one of almost complete agreement (Maton, 2004, pp. 178–179; also see Collini, 1993). As Karl Maton notes, the BBC's *The listener* wrote that 'Two cultures' divide as 'a central problem of our time' and concluded that there was 'general agreement on the reality of this division in our time', despite objections from a handful of the so-called 'literary intellectuals' (quoted in Maton, 2004, pp. 178–179). Yet it was not until nearly three years after Snow's lecture, in the spring of 1962, that one of Cambridge's most well-known and controversial 'literary intellectuals' (in many ways the nearest to a living embodiment of Snow's caricature) responded directly to Snow's lecture. F. R. Leavis, English professor at Downing College, chose as the topic of the Richmond lecture 'Two cultures? The significance of Lord Snow' (see Collini, 1993, p. xxxii). It would be his first public comment, albeit in a lecture closed to the press, about Snow's thesis.[3]

In the phenomenal popularity of Snow's thesis, one of Leavis's worst fears was coming to fruition: incoming Cambridge students, having imbibed the language and

ideology of Snow, which was in turn reflective of the stultifying values of technology, mass production and standardization, were incapable of pursuing the kind of proper literary scholarship to which Leavis had dedicated his career. Like many of his colleagues in the humanities, Leavis feared that liberal education as it was known would cease to exist and literary scholars would become irrelevant (see Plumb, 1964). While it may not be much of a stretch to say that Leavis's liberal humanism was of an extreme and often idiosyncratic nature, it represented a wider swathe of contemporary liberal humanism and its predecessors. However, its tumble into academic and political oblivion is a vibrant case study of why liberal humanism, more broadly, has since lost political momentum. To be sure, an outline of Leavis's vision of the university is not necessarily an endorsement of it—indeed, it is particularly unappealing in a number of respects—however, a careful articulation of its features may help to sift useful grains of information from an otherwise muddied vision of liberal humanism as it exists today.

The university and the 'English school': Leavis's liberal humanism

Leavis's attack on the trend-setting Snow was not simply a reactionary gesture. For much of his career, Leavis had developed a rather precise and particular definition of the university, centred on the study of English literature. In order to understand the urgency of his concern about the ascendance of Snow's conception of higher education, one needs to understand Leavis's idea of university education as it had developed over the course of his career. As an English scholar, Leavis devoted almost his entire work and energy into the analysis of 'culture' and literary criticism, advocating his own particular conception of the 'English school' within Cambridge (Mathieson, 1975, pp. 123–124). For him, literary criticism was a sacred activity that demanded expert skill, close textual analysis and a sensitivity to the role of language-as-culture. In the nascent field of English, Leavis was as much an innovator as an outsider (Mulhern, 1979, pp. 30–31 and chapter 1).

Generally speaking, he believed that language, when employed in the appropriate context and manner, carried the 'spiritual, moral and emotional tradition' that linked contemporary society with the best traditions of its past, pre-industrial modes of 'living' (Leavis & Thompson, 1933, p. 81). He deplored the language of mass culture, particularly mass advertising and entertainment, for its subversive effect on the language of human culture as found in great literature. It promoted a kind of 'substitute-living' based on temporary 'distractions'—cinema, popular novels, mass newspapers—from the dehumanizing nature of contemporary industrial society (ibid., 92). Leavis and Thompson quoted approvingly from Stuart Chase's *Men and machines* (1929): 'The initial effect of the Machine Age was to hurt the worker physically and mentally. It killed him, maimed him, infected, poisoned, and above all bored him, as perhaps no other culture has ever done' (quoted in Leavis & Thompson, 1933, p. 29).

Protection against the deadening affect of 'mass civilization' came in the form of education for 'consciousness':

> If one is to believe in anything one must believe in education. … [And] an education that conceives seriously its function in the modern world will, then, train awareness (a) of the general process of [mass] civilization and (b) of the immediate environment, physical and intellectual—the ways in which it tends to affect taste, habit, preconception, attitude to life and quality of living. For we [Leavis and Thompson] are committed to more consciousness; that way, if any, lies salvation. (Leavis & Thompson, 1933, pp. 4–5)

Against the conditioning of mass culture, Leavis and Thompson suggested a programme of study for students that involved careful study of the historical development of mass culture and advertising. The premise was that the fate of 'human' society as it had once existed rested on critical literary functions, the exercise that required the skill of a trained expert. The literary critic—that is, the university trained English scholar—was the guardian and guarantor of this culture. It was the task of the university, properly conceived, to maintain a cultural 'gold standard', because 'if something effective cannot be done at [the university level], it would seem vain to hope much of efforts in education at other levels' (Leavis, 1943, p. 16).

But this approach was not to be self-indulgent. Rather, Leavis argued, the university also served society in a symbolic and procedural role. As a symbol of 'cultural tradition' the university was 'representing a wisdom older than modern civilization and having an authority that should check and control the blind drive onward of material and mechanical development, with its human consequences' (Leavis, 1943, chapter 1). As a procedure, the 'humanist' tradition of literary criticism—which Leavis reminds the reader 'involves a great deal more than the literary'—was a method of inquiry which sought to discern a 'living tradition', a set of 'cultural values human and separable from any particular religious frame or basis' (ibid.). This 'living tradition' was furthermore to be independent of 'theory' or 'doctrine', arrived at by studying the 'concrete' details of the human relationship to society and its institutions. It was at once an anti-authoritarian concept in that it sought to challenge prevailing social norms and beliefs ('mass civilization') and a conservative ideal in that it sought 'continuity' with the past (ibid.).

His belief in the university as a secular ideal, and not a religious one, was in keeping with the traditional debate about higher education in British society most often associated with the thought of Cardinal John Henry Newman. In his later writing and lectures, including his response to Snow's 'Two cultures' in 1962, Leavis would affirm his university ideal as free from *any* doctrine or ideology—the state, industry, or most importantly, mass culture. Standing outside the influence of any other institution, the university-as-symbol would be a 'centre of consciousness for the whole community' (Leavis, 1969, p. 24). While the development and cultivation of the critical function may have been an exclusive activity, its products were to be public; its greater purpose was to be a 'creative nuclei of a larger community' (ibid.). For Leavis, as well as his close colleague Denys Thompson, this creative project had an urgent, and indeed political, duty in industrial and post-industrial society: to be an education 'against' environment, namely the anti-intellectual conditionings of mass culture (Leavis & Thompson, 1933, p. 106).

In this sense, Leavis's idea of university education as 'counter-education' was anti-establishment and anti-authority (Walsh, 1980, p. 31; also Mulhern, 1979, p. 23). The 'educated public', sustained by the work done at universities, provided a balance of power against the ruling establishment: 'elites and oligarchies—and great men too—are necessary, but so is that which can check, control and use them, and, except as such a public, it can't exist—there is no other conceivable presence' (Leavis, 1972b, p. 214). Unlike Snow, who would characterize the productive power of industry and mass production as a power to be harnessed for social good, Leavis emphasized its power as one to be resisted for its capacity to do social harm.

And thus the line of the modern debate on higher education was drawn in sharp contrast. As Barnett has explained, whether Snow realized it or not, his rather play-ful articulation of 'gulf' between the two cultures of science and humanities was no mere spat between disciplines, but rather a 'gulf in the conceptions of what a higher education stood for; and it was Snow's failure to recognize *that* that lay at the heart of Leavis' attack on Snow's association of the two cultures' (Barnett, 2000, p. 107). Even more aptly, Collini suggests that Snow had, perhaps unknowingly, 'blundered across one of the most sensitive terrains in twentieth century English culture: the assessment of the human consequences of the Industrial Revolution' (Collini, 1993, p. xxxiii). And where one stood on the role of the university in society was inextricable from that assessment.

To outside observers Leavis's response to Snow could easily have seemed that of a self-important 'ivory tower' academic. But, as Maton convincingly argues, the 'Two cultures' debate, combined with the perceived crisis in the humanities, represented a larger, historical crisis in the 'liberal humanist idea of "culture"' (2004, p. 181). That is, Leavis's use of the word 'culture' as a descriptive and explanatory tool was decidedly out-of-step with contemporary uses of the word, most especially as it was employed by Snow. Where Snow's 'culture' was dynamic and expansive, Leavis's was narrow and unchanging. It would be on this changing popular notion of culture that subsequent debates about higher education would pivot.

Pluralism and postmodernism: the erosion of the traditional 'idea of the university'

Though Leavis's idea of the university contained particularities reflective of his own life and work, its fundamental assumptions about the relationship between higher education and society were deeply resonant with the liberal humanist conception of higher education in Britain and elsewhere. To a great extent it is these fundamental assumptions which were undermined in the second half of the twentieth century, amidst a changing popular conception of 'culture' (Barnett, 1990); consequently, instrumentalism, a notion which evaded the problematic of culture, rose to fill the void left by the erosion of faith in these liberal humanist assumptions. The first major assumption is that one can arrive at some kind of rational, if not objective, knowledge and truth in any kind of learning endeavour (ibid.). The much-debated concept of postmodernity suggests that such knowledge is unattainable and claims

the end of the Enlightenment project with which the traditional western university had been closely associated (see Habermas, 1989; Smith & Webster, 1997; Barnett, 2000; Taylor *et al.*, 2002). The height of postmodern discourse (c. 1980s) coincided with much discussion about 'crisis' in the university, reflective of a loss of 'faith in Progress' and even fears of a 'repeal of the educational revolution' that had been the expansion of higher education in the late 1950s and 1960s (Scott, 1984, chapter 9; also see Salusbury, 1989).

The second major assumption underlying both Leavis's conception of the university and the liberal humanist ideal is that the university, or any higher education institution for that matter, 'is offered in institutional settings relatively independent of narrow social interests' (Barnett, 2000, p. x). The notion of institutional independence has been at the heart of the western university tradition since the eighteenth century (see Moore, 2004, chapter 3). It has manifested itself in Germany through what Habermas has called the 'implicit sociology of German idealism', that an institution could not be purely functional and needed a 'higher purpose' to guide it, such as the search for truth (Habermas, 1989). Examples of the liberal humanist ideal in British thought include the works of Newman and Matthew Arnold, the latter a major influence on Leavis.

The ascendance of a postmodern, pluralist notion of culture, incidentally, found itself a natural partner in a *seemingly* disinterested, culturally-empty, market-based governing philosophy. But Leavis's liberal humanism, like its more mainstream form, warned against such 'interests' in higher education. A market-based approach, he and others argued, eroded the ability of the university to provide that meaningful 'counter-education'. Thus, instead of Snow's emancipatory view of competition, innovation and disinterested knowledge used for noble purposes, the liberal humanist tradition fears that an ostensibly instrumentalist, market-based policy masks cultural favouritism and elitism rather than erasing it. In other words, Snow's optimistic call to embrace scientific progress may have a hidden cost: the increasing dependence of educational institutions on the vagaries and desires of capitalist industry. If higher education is treated as an apolitical exercise—i.e., as a service provider for the market—then it is at its most vulnerable when confronted with strong political interests. As Hayward has pointed out, the increasing popularity of Government-promoted 'market schemes' in higher education over the last several decades has greatly accelerated university dependence on industry demands (Hayward, 2004, pp. 6–7).

But Leavis's view of the liberal university is not unproblematic, and it fact has serious political concerns of its own. The cultural historian Raymond Williams has argued that 'literary experience cannot be the sole test, or even the central test', when talking about education, and what makes a proper education (Williams, 1959, p. 261). In his view, Leavis's idea of literary study as culture, and such study as vital to the human condition, is nostalgic and inaccurate:

> The tendency to reduce experience to literary evidence alone is commonly tempting … many advertisements and many newspapers are cheap and nasty. But we do not too easily construct from such evidence a contemptuous version of the lives of our contemporaries. (Williams, 1959, pp. 260–261)

Moreover, the industrial age certainly creates 'new kinds of unsatisfying work', 'cheap entertainment' and 'a number of new kinds of social division'; but it is also accompanied by 'certain evident improvements, and new opportunities, in education' and 'certain important new kinds of social organization' (ibid.). 'Between all these and other factors,' Williams says, 'the balance has to be more finely drawn than the myth allows' (ibid.). Ultimately, Williams concludes that Leavis's minority culture, despite his protestations to the contrary, is fundamentally undemocratic.

Williams' analysis of Leavis, then, is a dismissal of the western tradition of the university and one in which others on the left have joined (see Taylor *et al.*, 2002). From Kant and Jaspers to Newman and Leavis, liberal humanists have advocated some form of segregated role for academics, not unlike the role of a clerical scholar who seeks and possesses a kind of truth (see Jaspers, 1959; Pelikan, 1992; Rand, 1992). The challenge for those seeking to define a role for the university in the 'knowledge' or 'information' society is to find justification between the 'traditional role of the universities' as disseminators of culture and knowledge providers who serve the 'market and its instrumentalism' (ibid., p. 156). The question seems to be whether there is still room for the university, as an institution, in the deliberation of culture and the political 'public sphere' (see Delanty, 2001).

The problem of 'culture': from Leavis and Snow to Thatcher and Blair

Most immediately, the disagreement between Snow and Leavis represented a split between beliefs in the process social change—the radical Snow and the conservative Leavis—as well as between the philosophical bases of equality, freedom and citizenship. That is, do material standards, as Snow would assert, reflect levels of well-being and happiness? Or, does material improvement simply leave one 'to enjoy a "high standard of living" in a vacuum of disinheritance'? (Leavis, 1969, p. 5). At the same time the Snow–Leavis affair was about justifying the place of the academic in society, a contemporary 'crisis' that has not resolved itself to this day (see Taylor *et al.*, 2002, chapter 9; also Delanty, 2001). Ultimately, it was about the human adaptation to modernity and industrialism—the crisis of culture in a late modern age. This is the question which must be directly confronted by higher education institutions if they are to play a meaningful cultural and social role in contemporary society. Why have universities and other institutions of higher education failed to address the issue thus far?

Part of the reason is that the very notion of culture has, since the 1960s and 1970s, been a centre of serious political and social conflict. In many ways, the results of this 'culture war', a political phenomenon of both the US and Britain, has been to stake out two extreme views of the role of culture in education—leaving little chance of a meaningful compromise between the two. As David Hollinger has noted, the result of the multiculturalist/pluralist movement of the 1970s and 1980s has been to redefine the term 'culture' to be 'a euphemism for "ethnicity" or "race"' (Hollinger, 1995, p. 13). This new definition of 'culture' was not only a mark of movements on

the left who sought minority rights and social inclusion, but also a code word for an emerging right-wing populism that would be the hallmark of Thatcherism in Britain (see Hall, 1983; Seidel, 1986). Pluralism thus created a multiplicity of cultures, native and foreign, high and low, that were bandied about by those on the left and right as part of a political agenda. In historical perspective, Leavis's use of the word 'culture' seems naïve, elitist and representative of only one type of culture, specifically White, male and university-trained; in other words, thoroughly anti-pluralist and much more akin to current right-wing view of culture, which seeks to 'universalize' the human experience to an extreme.

However, to understand Leavis's idea of 'culture' in this way—in the contemporary right-wing sense—is historically anachronistic and perhaps inaccurate. It was more complicated than its critics might suggest—combining elements of folk-pastoral culture with 'high' culture, a term Leavis nonetheless disparaged—but most importantly it was not engaged with the pluralist/multiculturalist critique of culture within which later writers considered it (Leavis, 1930, p. 26; see Willis, 1990, p. 25 and Swingewood, 1977, pp. xi, 4–5). Though it certainly did not call for the necessary inclusion of women, minorities and other marginalized groups into cultural study, it did not explicitly exclude such on the basis of identity and indeed demanded a diversity of 'social position, economic self-interest and political standing' and a distinct 'lack of ideological unity' (Leavis, 1972b, p. 213). Thus, in dismissing Leavis's liberal humanism later critics have correctly identified its biases, prejudices and cultural perspective. However, in dismissing such elements, its critics conflate the problem of cultural elitism with mere cultural perspective. It is in recognizing this difference—between discussion infused with cultural bias and discussion *about* culture—that we can begin to leave behind Leavis's rather dated and narrow views and embrace the more expansive aspects of his liberal humanism. In this way, I propose a debate about the social and cultural role of the university and the purpose of higher education that progresses from the postmodernist tendency to shy away from culture for fear of prejudice or exclusion towards a more fluid, inclusive 'cosmopolitanism', discussed below, which engages a common discussion *about* culture.

Thus, the British liberal humanist tradition in higher education sunk with the Leavis ship. And what began as a progressive social movement to include *more* cultures in the academic setting has regressed into a conservative movement to *exclude* critical debate about culture within higher education. This postmodern sensibility, as I call it, poses, in theory, as a mode of disinterested knowledge-seeking; in practice, however, it threatens to become, if it has not already, an educational principle which discounts academic autonomy and integrity in the face of marketability, trainability and accountability.

A carefully considered liberal humanist philosophy can provide the basis for a kind of 'third way' between the intellectual void of cultural relativism and the conservative tendency of instrumentalism. Thus, I have sought to consider the historical path of recent liberal humanism and examine where it has diverged or failed, and why. In the final section, which I acknowledge as merely speculative and

hopefully provocative, I offer some possible foundational elements of a new debate about the social and cultural role of higher education in Britain.

A 'third way' in higher education: cosmopolitanism and commonality

As a starting point, I borrow the notion of cosmopolitanism, as defined by Hollinger (1995) and Taylor *et al.* (2002), as a basis for a third way in higher education. Cosmopolitanism, in this view, represents diversity not explicitly based on ethnicity, race or gender but that is based on more open and dynamic cultural and social identities (see Hollinger, 1995; Taylor *et al.*, 2002). This cosmopolitanism, as articulated by Hollinger, is a distinct alternative to the pluralism of the multicultural movement that would be so critical of Leavis:

> Pluralism respects inherited boundaries and locates individuals within one or another of a series of ethno-racial groups to be protected and preserved. Cosmopolitanism is more wary of traditional enclosures and favours voluntary affiliations. Cosmopolitanism promotes multiple identities, emphasizes the dynamic and changing character of many groups, and is responsive to the potential for creating new cultural combinations (Hollinger, 1995, pp. 3–4)

Cosmopolitanism, then, offers an opportunity for the university to be involved in the business of dissecting, analyzing and commenting on 'culture', instead of guarding its nostalgic form or making 'false' choices about what culture goes in which category (see Hollinger, 1995, introduction, chapter 2). Most importantly, it prescribes a proactive social role for higher education, rather than a reactive, secondary one.

It also allows the university to serve another critical function in society, that of arbiter—rather than disseminator or guardian—of knowledge, as articulated by Habermas (1987, 1989). Habermas, frustrated with what he sees as the ascendance of the neoconservative—and therefore highly political—ideology of relativism and instrumentalism in the university, argues that:

> … processes of differentiation that have accelerated over the last two decades [1970s and 1980s] do not *have to* be described in terms of systems theory, and they do not *have to* lead to the conclusion that universities have now left the horizon of the lifeworld behind completely. (Habermas, 1989, p. 107)

The increasingly specialist divisions within the university do not benefit science at the expense of the humanities, nor do they benefit general research in any field. Habermas advocates that the university, as a whole institution, operate on an ideal that necessarily unifies the research of all disciplines towards a common goal (ibid.). A more focused higher education philosophy, perhaps guided by a deeper discussion of culture and society, would pull seemingly disparate university departments together rather than encourage separate forays into the market in search of meaning, recognition and funding.

The commonality of university work, according to Habermas, would be the process in which knowledge is produced and adjudicated; what he calls the 'ideal

speech situation'. 'In this situation,' he says, 'participants are treated and treat each other as equals, communication is orientated towards a collective understanding of truth, and claims are adjudicated by recourse to a better argument' (quoted in Barnett, 2004, p. 65). Note that Habermas (1987) does not claim that the university possesses a kind of truth, but it remains the social site at which such truth is pursued, in the tradition of the Enlightenment. It is not unlike Leavis's idea of the university as a 'centre of consciousness for the community', functioning independent of what Habermas would call 'bourgeois society and the political public sphere' (1989, p. 109; also see Leavis, 1943, chapter 1). Thus, Habermas' ideal university is the broad, inclusive community of scholars to Leavis's insular coterie of literary critics; nevertheless, both make some claim to the liberal tradition in higher education. Most importantly, this vision of inclusion and participation is not one stripped of social and cultural issues—indeed, its mission would be to discuss and examine these very issues.

It is difficult to identify forms of cosmopolitanism and commonality in the context of contemporary higher education policy. The New Labour position, as in the words of Secretary Clarke, that the 'wider non-economic benefits [of higher education] are overrated', is a narrow and impoverished view of the social and cultural role of higher education in contemporary society. The insufficiency of the current position, and its reflection of an ascendant postmodern sensibility among policy-makers, is all the more important to recognize as the Government seeks to rapidly expand access to higher education for all. Losing touch with the 'non-economic' benefits of higher education might very well render the pursuit of the 'non-economic' functions of society—good citizenship, political participation, charity—meaningless. Instead, as Taylor *et al.* argue, the need for marketable 'work skills' should be a central priority of higher education institutions, but only as part of a suite of paramount goals and objectives, including those with social and cultural value (Taylor *et al.*, 2002, p. 161). Ultimately, Hollinger's notion of cosmopolitanism and Habermas' 'commonality' provide a challenge to the university, much like the challenge to modern society, of how to reconcile the tension between cultural and social diversity, economic opportunity, and the need for a common conception of citizenship, responsibility and social commitment.

Notes

1. The terms 'university' and 'higher education' are often conflated, but do not necessarily mean the same thing. I use both terms in this paper, but recognize that the two terms carry distinct, and nuanced, connotations in different contexts and in different countries. I prefer to maintain a loose definition for both for the purposes of this paper, while making a general distinction between 'the university' as a more specific and more historical label and 'higher education' as a more general, all-encompassing term that reflects today's diversity of institutions. The reason for maintaining these loose definitions is that, because of the occasionally loaded meaning of each term, choosing one or the other exclusively may prematurely restrict a debate which I am precisely attempting to broaden.
2. In this article, I stick to a general distinction between 'liberal humanist' and 'instrumentalist' schools of thought about the role of higher education in British society. It is important to note,

however, that myriad other perspectives on the social role of higher education exist—from feminists to socialists to postcolonial theorists, for example. I therefore apologize in advance for what may appear to be an artificially binary distinction between competing philosophies of higher education; however a detailed and adequate discussion of more specific theories is beyond the scope, and outside the aim, of this article. In addition, I maintain the 'liberal humanist' and 'instrumentalist' distinction in keeping with the mainstream historical classification of such higher education discussion, which is in fact the primary target of scrutiny in this paper.

3. The lecture would be reprinted in *The Spectator*, 9 March 1962.

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